

The Brown Mask

Percy J. Brebner

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Title: The Brown Mask

Author: Percy J. Brebner

Release Date: February, 2006 [EBook #9849]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on October 24, 2003]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

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Produced by Juliet Sutherland, Beth Trapaga
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THE BROWN MASK

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Percy J. Brebner

Author of "Princess Maritza," "Vayenne," "A Royal Ward"

1911

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CHAPTER I

BRETHREN OF THE ROAD

Dismal in appearance, the painted sign over the mean doorway almost obliterated by time and weather, there was nothing attractive about the "Punch-Bowl" tavern in Clerkenwell. It was hidden away at the end of a narrow alley, making no effort to vaunt its existence to the world at large, and to many persons, even in the near neighbourhood, it was entirely unknown. Like a gentleman to whom debauchery has brought shame

and the desire to conceal himself from his fellows, so the "Punch-Bowl" seemed an outcast amongst taverns. Chance visitors were few, were neither expected nor welcomed, and ran the risk of being told by the landlady, in terms which there was no possibility of misunderstanding, that the place was not for them. It was natural, therefore, that a certain air of mystery should surround the house, for, although the alley was a _cul-de-sac_, there were stories of marvellous escapes from this trap even when the entrance was closed by a troop of soldiers, and it was whispered that there was a secret way out from the "Punch-Bowl" known only to the favoured few. Nor was an element of romance wanting. The dwellers in this alley were of the poorest sort, dirty and unkempt, picking up a precarious livelihood, pickpockets and cutpurses--"foysters" and "nyppers" as their thieves' slang named them; yet, through all this wretched shabbiness there would flash at intervals some fine gentleman, richly dressed, and with the swagger of St. James's in his gait. Conscious of the sensation he occasioned, he passed through the alley looking strangely out of place, yet with no uncertain step. He was a hero, not only to these ragged worshippers, but in a far wider circle where wit and beauty moved; he knew it, gloried in it, and recked little of the price which must some day be paid for such popularity. The destination of these gentlemen was always the "Punch-Bowl" tavern.

Neither of a man, nor of a tavern, is it safe to judge only by the exterior. A grim and forbidding countenance may conceal a warm heart, even as the unprepossessing "Punch-Bowl" contained a cosy and comfortable parlour. To-night, half a dozen fine gentlemen were enjoying their wine, and it was evident that the landlady was rather proud of her guests. Buxom, and not too old to forget that she had once been accounted pretty, she still loved smartness and bright colours, was not averse to a kiss upon occasion, and had a jest--coarse, perhaps, but with some wit in it--for each of her customers. She knew them well--their secrets, their love episodes, their dangers; sometimes she gave advice, had often rendered them valuable help, but she had also a keen eye for business. Her favours had to be paid for, and even from the handsomest of her customers a kiss had never been known to settle a score. The "Punch-Bowl" was no place for empty pockets, and bad luck was rather a crime than an excuse. When it pleased her the landlady could tell many tales of other fine gentlemen she had known and would never see again, and she always gave the impression that she considered her former customers far superior to her present ones. Perhaps she found the comparison good for her business since she spoke to vain men. She had become reminiscent this evening.

"The very night before he was taken he sat where you're sitting," she said, pointing to one of her customers who was seated by the hearth. "Ah! He made a good end of it did Jim o' the Green Coat; kicked off his boots as if they were an old pair he had done with, and threw the ordinary out of the cart, saying he had no time to waste on him just then. I was there and saw it all."

There was silence as she concluded her glowing tale. Depression may take hold of the most careless and light-hearted for a moment, and even the attraction of making a good end, with an opportunity of spurning a worthless ordinary, cannot always appeal. The landlady had contrived to make her story vivid, and furtive glances were cast at the individual who occupied the seat she had indicated. There suddenly appeared to be something fatal in it and ample reason why a man might congratulate himself on being seated elsewhere. The occupant was the least concerned. He had taken the most comfortable place in the room; it seemed to be

rightly his by virtue of his dress and bearing. He had the grand air as having mixed in high society, his superiority was tacitly admitted by his companions, and the landlady had addressed herself especially to him, as though she knew him for a man of consequence.

"When the time comes you shall see me die game, too, I warrant," he laughed, draining his glass and passing it to be refilled. "One death is as good as another, and at Tyburn it comes quicker than to those who lie awaiting it in bed."

"That's true," said the landlady.

"I should hate to die in a bed," the man went on. "The open road for me and a quick finish. It's the best life if it isn't always as long as it might be. I wouldn't forsake it for anything the King could offer me. It's a merry time, with romance, love and adventure in it, with plenty to get and plenty to spend, with a seasoning of danger to give it piquancy--a gentleman's life from cock-crow to cock-crow, and not worthy of a passing thought is he who cannot make a good end of it. I'd sooner have the hangman for a bosom friend than a man who is likely to whimper on the day of reckoning. Did I tell you that a reverend bishop offered me fifty guineas for my mare the other day?"

"You sold her?" came the question in chorus.

"Sold her! No! I told him that she would be of little use to him, since no one but myself could get her up to a coach."

"Your impudence will be the death of you, John," laughed the landlady.

"That seems a fairly safe prophecy," answered Gentleman Jack--for so his companions named him--"still, I've heard of one bishop who took to the road in his leisure hours. He died of a sudden fever, it was said; but, for all that, he returned one night from a lonely ride across Hounslow Heath, and was most anxious to conceal the fact that somebody had put a bullet into him. My bishop may have become ambitious--indeed, I think he had, for he had intellect enough to understand my meaning and was not in the least scandalised."

"Then we may yet welcome him at the 'Punch-Bowl,'" said one man. "So far, this house has entertained no one higher in the church than a Fleet parson. I see no sin in drinking the bishop's good health and wishing him the speedy possession of a horse to match his ambition."

"Anyone may serve as a toast," said another; "but could a bishop be good company under any circumstances, think you?"

"Gad! why not?" asked Gentleman Jack. "He'd Spend his time trying to square his profession with his conscience maybe, and when a man is reduced to that, bishop or no bishop, there's humour enough, I warrant."

The health was drunk with laughter, and the air of depression which had followed the landlady's recital disappeared like clouds from an April sky. Each one had some story to tell, some item to add to the accumulated glory of the road.

"Ay, it's a merry life," said the man who had had doubts about the bishop's company, "and the only drawback is that it comes to an end when you're at the top of your success. The dealers in blood-money never hunt

a man down until he's worth his full price."

"And isn't that the best time to take the last ride?" exclaimed Gentleman Jack. "Who would choose to grow old and be forgotten? What should we do sitting stiffly in an armchair, wearing slippers because boots hurt our poor swollen feet? What should we be without a pair of legs strong enough to grip the saddle or with eyes too dim to recognise a pretty woman, lacking fire to fall in love, and with lips which had lost their zest for kissing?"

"But we come to that last ride before we lack anything--that's the trouble," was the answer.

"Not always," said another man. "Galloping Hermit was feared on all the roads before I had stopped my first coach, and he is still feared to-day." The speaker was young, and he mentioned the name of the notorious highwayman with a kind of reverence.

"They say he's the devil himself, and that's why he's never been taken," said another. "Did any of you ever see him?"

"Once." And they all turned quickly towards the man who spoke. "My mare had gone lame, and I had dismounted in a copse to examine her, when there was the quick, regular beat of hoofs at a gallop across the turf. I was alert on my own account in a moment, crouching down amongst the undergrowth, for with a lame animal I could have made but a poor show. There flashed past me a splendid horseman, man and beast one perfect piece of harmony. The moon was near the full. I saw the neat, strong lines of the horse, the easy movement of the rider, and I could see that the mask which the man wore was brown. This happened two years ago, out beyond Barnet."

"And without that brown mask no one knows him." said the man who had first spoken of him. "He has been met on all the roads, north, south, east and west--never in company, always alone. He never fails, yet the blood-feasters have watched for him in vain. Truly, he disappears as mysteriously as the devil might. He may go to Court. He may be a well-known figure there, gaming with the best, a favoured suitor where beauty smiles. He may even have been here amongst us at the 'Punch-Bowl' without our knowing it."

"It is not impossible," Gentleman Jack admitted, smiling a little at the others' enthusiasm.

"I envy him," was the answer. "We seem mean beside such a man as Galloping Hermit."

"I do not cry 'Yes' to that," said Gentleman Jack, just in time to prevent an outburst from the landlady, who appeared to fancy that the quality of her entertainment was being called in question. "The brown mask conceals a personality, no doubt, but before we can judge between man and man we must know something of their various opportunities. Were he careful and lucky, such a man as my bishop would be hard to run to earth. Galloping Hermit is careful, for only at considerable intervals do we hear of him. The road would seem to be a pastime with him, rather than a life he loved. For me, the night never comes that I do not long to be in the saddle, that I do not crave for the excitement, even if there be no spoil worth the trouble of taking. This man is different. He is only abroad when the quarry is certain. True, success has been his,

but for all that the fear of Tyburn may spoil his rest at night, and when he gets there we may find that the brown mask conceals a coward after all."

"Had you seen him that night as I did you would not say so," was the answer.

"I like speech with a man before I judge his merits," said Gentleman Jack, rising from his chair and flicking some dust from his sleeve. He appeared to resent such slavish admiration of Galloping Hermit--perhaps because he felt that his own pre-eminence was challenged. It pleased him to think that his name must be in everyone's mouth, that his price in the crime-market must for months past have been higher than any other man's, and he was suddenly out of humour with the frequenters of the "Punch-Bowl." He threw a guinea to the landlady, told her to buy a keepsake with the change, and passed out with a careless nod, much as though he intended never to come back into such low company.

The landlady stood fingering the guinea, turning it between her finger and thumb, rather helping her reflections by the action than satisfying herself that the coin was a good one.

"I believe we've had Galloping Hermit here to-night," she said suddenly. "It was unlike Gentleman Jack to talk as he did just now. Mark my words, he wears a brown mask on special occasions, and thought by sneering to throw dust in our eyes. It's not the first time I have considered the possibility, and I'm not sure that I won't buy a brown silk mask for keepsake and slip it on when next I see him coming in at the door. That would settle the question."

She had many arguments to support her opinion, reminded her customers of many little incidents which had occurred in the past, recalling Gentleman Jack's peculiar behaviour on various occasions. Her arguments sounded convincing, and for an hour or more they discussed the question.

The opportunity to test her belief by wearing a brown silk mask never came, however, for that same night Gentleman Jack was taken on Hounslow Heath. A stumbling horse put him at the mercy of the man he sought to rob, who struck him on the head with a heavy riding-whip, and when the highwayman recovered consciousness he found himself a prisoner, bound hand and foot. He endeavoured to bargain with his captor, and made an attempt to outwit him, but, failing in both efforts, he accepted his position with a good grace, determined to make the best of it. Newgate should be proud of its latest resident. For a little space, at any rate, he would be the hero of fashionable circles, and go to his death with all the glamour of romance. He would leave a memory behind him that the turnkeys might presently make stirring tales of, as they drank their purl at night round the fire in the prison lobby.

The highwayman's story concerning the bishop quickly went the round of the town, and a wit declared that at least half the reverend gentlemen went trembling in their shoes for fear of their names being mentioned. The story, and the wit's comment, served to raise the curiosity of the fashionable world, and more than one coach stopped by Newgate to set down beauty and its escort on a visit to the highwayman. But a greater sensation was pending. Who first spread the report no one knew, but it was suddenly whispered that this man was in reality no other than the notorious wearer of the brown mask. When questioned he did not deny it, and his evident pleasure at the mystery which surrounded him went far to

establish the story. For every person interested in Gentleman Jack, a dozen were anxious to see and speak to Galloping Hermit. Every tale concerning him was recalled and re-told, losing nothing in the re-telling. Men had rather envied his adventurous career, many women's hearts had beat faster at the mention of his name, and now the most absurd theories regarding his real personality were seriously discussed in coffee-houses, in boudoirs, and even at Court. It was whispered that the King himself would intervene to save him from the gallows.

For a long time no trial had caused such a sensation, and Judge Marriott, whose ambition it was to be likened to his learned and famous brother, Judge Jeffreys, rose to the occasion and succeeded in giving an excellent imitation of the bullying methods of his idol. This was an opportunity to win fame, he argued, and he gave full play to the little wit he possessed and ample licence to his undeniable powers of vituperation and blasphemy.

Newgate was thronged, and the prisoner bore himself gallantly as a man might in his hour of triumph. It was a great thing to be an object of interest to statesmen, scholars, and wits, and to win smiles and tears from beauty. His eyes travelled slowly over the sea of faces, and rested for a little while upon a young girl. Her eyes were downcast, but he thought there must be tears in them, and for a moment he was more interested in her than in anyone else. Why had she come? She was different from all the other women about her. Beside her sat an elderly woman who seemed to be enjoying herself exceedingly, and appeared to find especial relish in Judge Marriott's remarks. The more brutal they were the more witty she seemed to think them.

As sentence was pronounced the girl rose to her feet and turned to go. In truth, it had been no wish of hers to come. The judge, the people, and the whole atmosphere sickened her. She longed to get away, to feel the fresh air upon her cheek; and in her anxiety to depart she took no particular trouble to make sure that her companion was following her. There was a hasty crushing on all sides of her, and as she was carried forward she became conscious that she was alone, that she was being stared at and commented upon by some of those who were about her. She ought not to be there, she felt it rather than knew it, and was painfully aware that people were judging her accordingly. One man spoke to her, and in her effort to escape his attentions she contrived to thrust herself into a corner of an outer lobby, and waited.

"Can I be of service?"

For a moment she thought that the man she had escaped from had found her, and she turned indignantly. The steady grey eyes that met hers were eyes to trust--she felt that at once. This was quite a different person. He was young, with a face grave beyond his years, and a sense of strength about him likely to appeal to a woman.

"I am waiting for my aunt, Lady Bolsover," she said, the colour mounting to her cheeks under his steady gaze, and then, suddenly anxious that he should not think evil of her, she added: "I did not want to come. It was horrible."

"Your aunt must have missed you," he said, glancing round the almost empty lobby, for the crowd had poured out into the street by this time. "If you have a coach waiting, may I take you to it?"

"Oh, please--do."

The crowd was dense in the street, and their progress was slow, but the man forced a way for her. His face gave evidence that it would be dangerous for anyone to throw a jest at his companion. There was a general inclination to give him the wall as he went.

"I am glad you did not come here willingly," he said suddenly, as though no other thought had been in his mind all this time. "This is no place for a woman."

"Indeed, no. I am wondering why a man should be here either."

"Galloping Hermit once did me a kindness. I would like to repay the debt."

"But how? What could you do?"

"I could not tell. Something might have happened to give me an opportunity. It did not; still, I shall see him presently. Perhaps I may yet be able to do him some small service."

"Oh, I hope so, poor man," she answered. "There is the coach, and my aunt. She will thank you."

Lady Bolsover, who was talking to Lord Rosmore, did not appear agitated, but she hurried forward when she caught sight of her niece.

"My child, I have been consumed with anxiety, and--"

"This gentleman--" the girl began, and then stopped. The man had not followed her as she went to meet her aunt. He had disappeared.

There came no intervention on the prisoner's behalf in the days that followed, nor did he set up any plea for his life on the ground of knowing of plots against the King's Majesty. This would be to shirk the day of reckoning, and he had boasted to his companions at the "Punch-Bowl" that they should see him play the game to the end. He would fulfil this promise to the letter. He had ridden up Holborn Hill scores of times, seeking spoil and adventure on Hounslow Heath or elsewhere; he would journey up it once more, and pay the price like a gentleman. It would be no lonely journey; there would be excitement and triumph in it. He had lived his life and enjoyed it; he had allowed nothing to stand in the way of his desires; he had pressed into a few short years far more satisfaction than any other career could have given him. Why should he whimper because the end came early? It would be a good end to make, full of movement and colour. He knew, for he had been a spectator when others had taken that journey, and he was of more importance than they were. The whole town was ringing with his fame. Why should he have regrets? Beauty and fashion came to visit him, and one man came to thank him for some former kindness, a trivial matter that the highwayman had thought nothing of and had forgotten.

It came, that last morning, a fine morning flushed with the new life of the world that trembles hesitatingly in the spring of the year, and steeps the hearts of men and women with stronger hope and wider ambition; such a morning as draws a veil over past failures and disappointments, and floods the future with success and achievement. It seemed a pity to have to die on such a morning, and for one moment there

was regret in the highwayman's soul as he took his place in the cart. The next he braced himself to play his part, for there were great crowds in the streets, waiting and making holiday. All eyes were turned, watching for the procession, for was it not Galloping Hermit who came, the notorious wearer of the brown mask, the hero of wealth and squalor alike, the man whose deeds had already passed into legend? No one thought of him as Gentleman Jack, not even his companions of the "Punch-Bowl" who were in the crowd to see him pass; not the landlady, who had come to see the last of him, and stood at the end of the journey, waiting and watching.

By the steps of St. Sepulchre's Church there was a pause. A woman, one of a frail sisterhood, yet strangely pretty and innocent to look upon, held up a great nosegay to the hero of the hour, and as he took it he bent down and kissed her.

"Don't let another's kiss make you forget this one too soon," he said gaily, and her lips smiled while there was a sob in her throat.

The cart jogged on again, and at intervals the man buried his face in the flowers. This was his hour, and if he had any fear or regret, there were no eyes keen enough to note the fact.

Tyburn and its fatal tree were in sight across a surging crowd. Even at the last moment the King might intervene, it was whispered, and there were some who looked for signs of a swift-coming messenger. But the cart came nearer, slowly and surely; the space round the gallows was kept clear with difficulty, and there was no sign of hurrying reprieve.

This was the end of the game. Now was the great test of courage. He was too great a man to indulge in small things to prove it.

"I've been used to riding in the night; a morning ride tires one," he said carelessly. "Let's get it over, or I shall be getting hungry, as all these folks must be. There's a good pair of boots for anyone who has the courage to wear them. I'm ready. Make an end of it."

And the landlady at the "Punch-Bowl" that night drank to his memory, declaring that he had died game, as was fitting for a gentleman of the road.

CHAPTER II

BARBARA LANISON

As the coach rolled heavily homewards towards St. James's Square, Lady Bolsover speedily recovered from her anxiety concerning her niece; she did not even reprimand her for getting lost in the crowd, and seemed to take no interest whatever in the gentleman who had come to the rescue and had not waited to be thanked. He could have been no person of consequence, or he would not have neglected the opportunity of bowing over her hand. She talked of nothing but the trial and the excellent manner in which her friend Judge Marriott had conducted it. Some of his witticisms she remembered and repeated with such excellent point that her niece shuddered again as she had done when they fell from the

judge's lips.

"It was altogether horrible," said the girl. "I wonder why you made me go."

"Judge Marriott's wit horrible!" exclaimed Lady Bolsover. "Pray do not say so in company, or you will be taken for a fool."

"I meant the trial--the whole thing. Why did we go?"

"Would you be altogether out of the fashion, Barbara?"

"Such fashion, yes, I think so."

"Ah, that's the drawback of living in the country," was the answer. "All one's morals and manners smell of the soil, and a woman's attainments are limited to the making of gooseberry wine and piecrusts. I was of that pattern myself once, but, thank heaven! I married wisely and escaped from it. You must do the same, Barbara."

"Indeed, I am not sure that I want to, and yet--"

"I am grateful for the reservation," said Lady Bolsover, "or I should be compelled to think that all my care of you during these last few months had been wasted."

"Oh, no; I have learnt many things--many things that it is good for me to know. I have seen men and women who seem to live in another world to the one I have knowledge of, a large and most interesting world, truly, yet not altogether to my taste. Is it not a strange world that can enjoy what we have witnessed to-day?"

"I must confess I enjoyed Judge Marriott hugely," was the answer, "and the prisoner was a man, I'll say that for him. I almost regret not having had the honour of being stopped by him. I grant you he was interesting, and played his part gallantly."

"Doomed to die on the gallows! Do you call that playing a part?"

"My dear," and Lady Bolsover touched the girl's arm, "did I not know your ancestry I should imagine your father a scurvy Puritan and your mother a kitchen wench given to long hymns and cant of a Sunday. Are you sure this cavalier of yours was not some miserable sniveller who found time to favour you with a sermon? He disappeared so hastily that it would seem he was ashamed of himself."

The girl did not answer, and if the colour came into her cheeks at the memory of what the man had said to her, Lady Bolsover was too amused at her own conjecture to notice it.

There are those who are so intent upon living that they have little time to think. Lady Bolsover was of these. The hour that did not hold some excitement in it wearied her and made her petulant. Her husband, dead these ten years, had been amongst the enthusiastic welcomers of Charles at his Restoration, and his wife had from first to last been a well-known figure in the Court of the Merry Monarch. That she was no beauty, rather than because she possessed any great strength of character, probably accounted for the fact that she enjoyed no peculiar fame in that dissolute company. As she could not be the heroine of an

intrigue, it pleased her to consider herself too great a dame for such affairs, and she was fully persuaded that she might count her lovers by the score, even now, had she so desired. As she had no very definite character, so she had no real convictions. Charles was dead, and James was King. Many changes were imminent, and Lady Bolsover was waiting to see in which direction the wind blew. Her nature, perhaps, was to hate Puritans and all their ways, but, if necessary to her own well-being, she would easily be able to love them and curse all Catholics. She was not really bad at heart, but she was a strange companion for Barbara Lanison.

Some few months ago Sir John Lanison, of Aylingford Abbey in Hampshire, Lady Bolsover's brother and Barbara's uncle and sole guardian since the death of her parents, had suggested that his sister should take charge of his ward for a little while. Practically she knew nothing of London, he said, and it was time she did. Sir John declared that he did not want it to be said that he had hidden his niece away at the Abbey so that no man should have a chance of seeing her. He had known prettier women, but she was well enough, and where her face failed to attract her ample fortune would.

"She's got more learning than is needful for a girl, to my mind," he told his sister; "but that kind of nonsense will be knocked out of her as soon as she understands her value as a woman. Send her back with all the corners rounded, my dear Peggy--that is what I want."

Lady Bolsover had done her best, but the result was not very satisfactory. Barbara had convictions which her aunt was powerless to undermine, and seemed to set such a value upon herself that no man was able to make the slightest impression on her. She had barely refrained from laughing outright at the compliments of recognised wits, and half a dozen gallants with amorous intentions had been baffled and put to shame. Lord Rosmore, whose way with a woman was pronounced irresistible, had declared her adorable, but impossible, and Judge Marriott had promised Lady Bolsover a very handsome gratuity if she could persuade her niece to favour him and become his wife.

Barbara Lanison could not be unconscious of the sensation she caused--a woman never is--but she sometimes studied the reflection in her mirror, and tried to discover the reason. Quite honestly she failed. She was not dissatisfied with the reflection, in its way it was pleasing, she admitted, but she had not supposed that it was of the kind that would appeal to men, and to such a variety of men. The women who usually pleased them were so different. It even occurred to her that there might be something in herself, in her behaviour, which was not quite nice, and that her real attraction lay in this, an idea which proved that her estimate of the men who came to her aunt's house was not a very high one.

Born and bred in the country, and with an amount of learning which her uncle considered unnecessary, she had prejudices, no doubt, and possibly had a standard of female beauty in her mind which her own reflection did not satisfy. That she was mistaken in her own estimate of herself was certain, or the men would not have been so assiduous in their attentions. Perhaps she admired dark women, and the reflection which smiled at her out of the depths of the mirror was fair. The eyes were blue--that blue which the sky shows in the early morning of a cloudless day, and there was a suggestion of tears in them--the tears which may come from much laughter rather than those which speak of sorrow. There

was a touch of gold in the fair hair, which was inclined to be rebellious and curl into little lovelocks about her neck and forehead. The skin was fair, with the bloom of perfect health upon it, and the little mouth was firm, the lips fresh as from the kiss of a rose. There was grace in all her movements, that unstudied grace which tells of life in the open air and freedom from restraint; and in thought and word and deed conventionality had small interest for her. It was hardly wonderful that Lord Rosmore should pronounce her adorable, or that Judge Marriott should forget that his youth was a thing of the past. Indeed, she had come as a revelation to the men whose lives were made up of Court intrigue and artificiality.

Perhaps another reason why Barbara Lanison found it difficult to understand the sensation she created lay in the fact that her heart and affections remained entirely untouched. Those blue eyes, underneath their long lashes, saw very keenly, and gave her a quick insight into character. She was not to be easily led, and if she did a good many things in her aunt's house, where she was a guest, which did not come naturally to her and which did not please her, there was a point beyond which no persuasion on Lady Bolsover's part could make her go. Much against her will she had been taken to the trial of the highwayman, and that she was ashamed of being there was shown by her eager desire to explain her presence to the man who had come to her rescue in the crowd. It would probably have annoyed Lady Bolsover considerably had she known that her niece thought more of this man during the next few days than of all the eligible gallants who had been brought to her notice.

If in one sense Lady Bolsover had to admit failure with regard to her plans concerning her niece, in another direction she had achieved considerable success, for since the advent of Barbara Lanison her own favour had been courted on all sides, and her house in St. James's Square had become a little Court in itself. To half a dozen men who had flattered her sufficiently as a first step towards her good graces, she had promised to do her best with her niece on their behalf, and at intervals she dispensed encouragements for which no action or private word of Barbara's gave any foundation. Lady Bolsover found her present entourage very pleasant, and was not inclined to spoil it by being too definitely honest. It was therefore with considerable chagrin that, a few days after the trial, she received a message from her brother that Barbara was to return to Aylingford Abbey without delay; and since Judge Marriott was about to pay him a visit, nothing could be better than that Barbara should travel in his company.

Barbara was quite ready to return to the Abbey, but she did not relish Judge Marriott as a travelling companion. He was old enough to be her father, and foolish enough to attempt to make love to her. She had disliked him from the first; she had come near to hating him since she had seen and heard him at that dreadful trial. The self-satisfied judge, on the other hand, hoped to make capital out of the trial. He had been instrumental in ridding the world of a notorious highwayman, one who had made himself unpleasantly known to not a few of those who were Sir John's guests from time to time. The trial would be much talked of at Aylingford, and Marriott could not fail to be a centre of attraction. His acumen must also have appealed to the woman whose escort he was to be. His conduct of the case must have impressed her with his importance. She was the most beautiful woman with whom he had ever been brought into contact, and his ambition took to itself wings. Why should not this woman belong to him? True, he had no family behind him to boast of, but he had made a position, and the way to greater things lay open before

him. Jeffreys was his friend, and Jeffreys was a power with the new King. High honours might be in the near future for Judge Marriott. He was an ugly man--with all his willingness to do so, he could not gainsay that; but he consoled himself with the reflection that many beautiful women had married men whose looks certainly did not recommend them. It was only the commonplace that women turned from, and he was sufficiently ugly not to be commonplace.

So Judge Marriott exerted himself to amuse and interest his fair young charge as they journeyed together into Hampshire, and not altogether without success. He soon discovered that all discussion concerning the trial was unwelcome, that the girl's foolish sympathies had been with the prisoner rather than the judge, and he quickly talked of other things. He almost made Barbara believe that he regretted Nature had not made him a highwayman instead of a judge, and he certainly succeeded in making the girl confess to herself that he was not such an unpleasant travelling companion as she had expected.

The day had been cloudy, threatening rain, and twilight came early. When the coach began to cross Burford Heath it was dusk. Barbara was tired, and leaned back in her corner, while the judge lapsed into silence, not altogether oblivious to the fact that there might be dangers upon the heath. The road was heavy, and in places deep-rutted; the grinding and crunching of the wheels, the only sound breaking the stillness of the evening, grew monotonous; and the constant heavy jolting was trying. Suddenly there was a cry from the post-boys, and the coach came to a standstill with a jerk.

"Curse them! They've managed to break down!" exclaimed Marriott. His hand trembled a little as he let down the window, and it seemed to Barbara that he was more afraid than angry. He thrust his head out of the window with an oath, then drew it in sharply. A horseman stood at the door with a pistol in his hand.

"There is payment to make for crossing the heath."

The judge broke out into a torrent of abuse, but whether at the man who barred his way or at himself for being unprepared, it was difficult to say.

"And the payment is extra for cursing your luck, especially in the presence of a lady," said the man sharply, in a tone which admitted no argument and proved him master of the situation.

Barbara, sitting upright, looked steadily into the masked face of the highwayman, deeply interested, but without fear. Was it fancy, or was there a familiar note in the man's voice? Marriott had shrunk back in the coach as he fumbled for his purse. He tried to conceal his face from the man, for, should the highwayman discover his identity, he might consider the moment opportune to avenge his brother of the road who had so recently died at Tyburn.

"A meagre purse for so famous a judge," the man said, weighing it in his hand; "but your money is a small matter. I have a bigger score to settle than that. Out with you!" and the man flung open the coach door.

Marriott shrank farther back until he appeared a very small and mean man in the corner of the coach. He tried to speak, but his words were inarticulate, and Barbara could feel him trembling violently.

"Get out, or--"

"Surely, sir, you would not kill him?" and Barbara stretched out an arm to protect him.

"Do you plead for him, mistress? He is lucky to have such an advocate. Get out, judge. For the sake of those bright eyes beside you, you may keep your life, but you shall do penance for your sins. Get out, I say."

Very reluctantly Marriott crept from the carriage.

"You have all my money," he whimpered.

"Down on your knees, then, and ask pardon for passing judgment on a better man than yourself. Down! Quickly, or this pistol of mine may forget that I have made a promise."

Marriott sank upon his knees in a place where the road was very muddy.

"The man I sent to Tyburn--say it after me."

"The man I sent to Tyburn," repeated Marriott.

"--was a gentleman compared to me."

"--was a gentleman compared to me."

"I am an unjust judge, a scoundrel at heart, a mean, contemptible coward, unfit to consort with honest men, and every pure, good woman should spurn me like dirt. Say it! Louder! The lady should be interested in your confession."

Marriott said the words, raising his voice as he was ordered.

"And I pray to Heaven to have pity on the soul of the man I sent to his death at Tyburn. Say it aloud, with uplifted hands. It is a prayer you may well make, for, God knows, you'll have need of all His mercy some day."

The prayer was repeated, and so like a real prayer was it that, in the darkness of the coach, Barbara smiled. Prayer and Judge Marriott seemed so wide asunder.

"Now get back into the coach, and take care your muddy clothes do not soil the lady's gown, as your presence could hardly fail to be pestilential to her, did she but know you as you really are. Good-night, fair mistress; some day I hope to see you under better escort."

For a moment he bowed low over his horse's neck, then he turned and galloped straight across the heath.

Judge Marriott had entered the coach hurriedly, so glad to escape from the highwayman that he did not consider how poor a figure he had cut in the sight of the girl. Fearful that his tormentor might not yet have done with him, he sank back in his corner again. Barbara was sitting forward looking from the window.

"He has gone," she said.

"Curse him!" said Marriott in a whisper. He was still afraid, and his voice trembled. "Surely his mask was--"

"It was brown," said Barbara. "I thought the man who wore the brown mask was dead."

"I thought so too," he muttered as he leaned forward to the window and watched the highwayman disappear into the shadows of the night.

CHAPTER III

GREY EYES

Where a stream, running through a wide track of woodland, turned to flow round three sides of a plateau of rising ground, a community of Cistercian monks had long ago founded their home. Possibly the original building was of small dimensions, but as the wealth of the community increased it had been enlarged from time to time, and, it would appear, with an ever-increasing idea of comfort. Of this completed building as the monks knew it, a large part remained, some of it in a more or less ruinous state it is true, but much of it incorporated in the work of those subsequent builders who had succeeded in converting Aylingford Abbey into one of the most picturesque residences in Hampshire. It faced away from the stream, and the long, massive front, besides being the most modern part of the building, was the least interesting aspect; indeed, it was difficult to get a comprehensive view of it, because the woods approached so closely that the traveller came upon it almost unawares. From every other side the outlines of the Abbey were singularly beautiful. Here a small spire sharply cut the sky, or a graceful point of roof told of a chapel or high-pitched hall; there, half frowning, half friendly, a mass of creeper-clad, grey wall looked capable of withstanding a siege. In some places solid pieces of masonry spoke of comparatively recent improvement, while towards one end of the building walls had crumbled, leaving ruined chambers open to wind and weather. There were open casements, through which one might catch a glimpse of comfort within, and again there were narrow slits, deeply sunk into thick walls, through which fancy might expect to hear the moan of some prisoner in a dungeon.

As it swept round the Abbey the stream broadened out, and its current became almost imperceptible. On one side the bank was comparatively low, but on the Abbey side a stone wall had been built up from the water. Above this was a broad terrace, flanked by the top of the wall, which rose some three or four feet above it, and into which seats had been cut at intervals. This terrace ran round three sides of the Abbey, and was mostly of stone flags, worn and green with age, but in some places there were stretches of trimly-kept grass. Two stone bridges arched and dipped from the terrace to the opposite bank of the stream. Wonderful vistas of the surrounding country were to be seen from the vantage ground of the terrace; here a peep through a sylvan glade to the blue haze of the hills beyond; there a glimpse of the roofs of the village of Aylingford, a mile away; and again a deep, downward view into dark woods, where mystery seemed to dwell, and perhaps fear, and out of which came the sound of running and of falling water.

It was not difficult to believe in the legends which the simple country folk told of Aylingford, and they were many. Had some old monk come suddenly out of the wood, over the bridge, and walked in meditation along the terrace, he would hardly have looked strange or out of place so long as a bevy of Sir John's visitors had not chanced to meet him. It seemed almost natural that when the night was still the echoes of old prayer and chant should still be heard, as folk said they were. Sir John himself had heard such sounds, so he affirmed, and would not have his belief explained away by the fact that the wind found much to make music with in the ruins. Then there were rooms which never seemed to be unoccupied; corridors where you felt that someone was always walking a little way in front of you or had turned the corner at the end the moment before; stairs upon which could be heard descending footsteps; doors which you did not remember to have noticed before. But while of legend there was plenty, of history there was little. It would appear that the monks had forsaken their home even before the Reformation, for the first Lanison had acquired in the Eighth Henry's reign a property "long fallen into ruinous decay," according to an old parchment. Possibly the writer of this description had not seen the Abbey, trusting, perchance, to the testimony of a man who had not seen it either, for certainly much of the present building was in existence then, and could hardly have been as ruinous as the parchment would lead one to suppose. It may be that Aylingford, lying in the depth of the country, away from the main road, escaped particular notice, and this might also account for the fact that it had never attracted the attention of Cromwell's men, which it reasonably might have done, seeing that the Lanisons were staunch for the King.

Since old Sir Rupert Lanison had first come to Aylingford, Lanisons had always been masters there--indifferent ones at times, as at intervals they had proved indifferent subjects, yet revered by the country folk.

Sir John, in the course of time, had become the head of the house of his ancestors, proud of his position, punctilious as to his rights, superstitious, and a believer in the legends of his home. He had married twice, losing each wife within a year of his wedding day, and had no child to succeed him. His brother, who had gone abroad ready to serve where-ever there was fighting to be done, had also married. His wife died young, too, and her daughter Barbara had come as a child to Aylingford. She did not remember her father, who subsequently died in the East Indies, leaving his child and a great fortune to the care of Sir John.

So the Abbey and the woods which surrounded it had been Barbara's world for eighteen years, for only once had she been to London before her visit to Lady Bolsover. In a measure this second visit was unhappily timed, for the death of King Charles had cast a gloom over the capital, and the accession of his brother James caused considerable apprehension in the country. Still, Barbara had created a certain sensation, and, according to Lady Bolsover, would have made a great match had not Sir John foolishly recalled her to the Abbey.

"She was just getting free from pastry and home-made wine, and my brother must needs plunge her back into them," Lady Bolsover declared to her friends, who were neither so numerous nor so distinguished now that Barbara had left St. James's Square.

Sir John had welcomed his niece, but had given no reason for bringing her home. She did not expect one. She had been away a long while; it was natural she should be home again, and she was glad. There was no real regret in her mind that she had left London; yet, somehow, life was different, and although she had been home nearly a week there was something which kept her from settling down into the old routine.

"Why is it? What is it? I wonder."

She was sitting on one of the stone seats cut in the wall of the terrace, leaning back to look across the woods. The morning sun flooded this part of the terrace with golden light, the perfume of flowers was heavy in the air. From the woods came a great song of birds; in the water below her a fish jumped at intervals--a cool sound on a hot day. She had this part of the terrace to herself for a little while, but from another part, round an angle of the house, came the murmur of voices and sometimes laughter, now a man's, now a woman's. It had all been just the same before, many, many times, yet now the girl was conscious of a sound of discord in it. Nothing had really changed. The Abbey was full of guests, as her uncle loved to have it, many of the same guests who came so constantly, many of those who had been her companions at Lady Bolsover's, and yet the world seemed changed somehow. The reason must lie in herself. Her visit to London had brought enlightenment to her, although she had only a vague idea of its meaning. She found it difficult not to shrink from some of her uncle's guests, a feeling she had not experienced until now. True, she had been brought more in contact with them during this last week than she had previously been. They treated her differently, no longer as a child, but as one of themselves. They spoke more freely, both the men and women, and it seemed to Barbara that only now was she beginning to understand them, and that it was this wider knowledge which made her shrink from them.

"I have become a woman; before I was only a girl--that must be the reason," she said, resting her chin on her clasped hands and looking down into the depths of the wood on the opposite side of the stream. "I have been very happy as a child, I do not believe I am going to be happy as a woman," and then she glanced towards the distant blue hills. The world was full of sunlight, even though the woods below her were dark and gloomy.

She looked along the terrace to make certain that no one was coming to disturb her--and she smiled to think how often she was disturbed in these days. Judge Marriott had only to catch sight of her, and he would leave any companion--man or woman--to hurry after her. At first he seemed only intent on proving to her that he had not really been afraid of the highwayman on Burford Heath, not on his own account at least, only on hers; but presently he began to praise her, stammering over high-flown compliments concerning her eyes or her hair, and looking ridiculously distressed as he uttered them. He made her laugh until she understood that he was making love to her, then she was angry. All yesterday he was sighing to be forgiven.

Then there was Sir Philip Branksome, who twice within the last three days had endeavoured to impress upon her the fact that his attentions were a very great honour. He was so sure of himself in this particular that it was almost impossible to despise him. There was Sydney Fellowes, too, near kinsman to my Lord Halifax, full of boyish enthusiasm, now for some warrior, now for some poet, chiefly for Mr. Herrick, whose poems he knew by heart and repeated sympathetically. In Barbara Lanison he

professed to find the ideal woman, the inspiration which, he declared, warrior and poet alike must have; and for hours together he would explain how debased he was, how exalted was she. He wrote verses to her, breathing these sentiments, and appeared to touch the height of his ambition for a moment when she deigned to listen to them. Barbara felt herself so much older than he was that she only stopped him when he grew too persistent, neither laughing at him nor despising him. She praised his verses which really had merit, but she would not understand that she had inspired them. And last evening Lord Rosmore had arrived, had bowed low over her hand and whispered a compliment. His looks, his attitude, had occasioned comment, for my Lord Rosmore seldom sought, he was so consistently sought after. Had not King Charles once called him the handsomest attraction of his acquaintance, and laughingly turned to warn a bevy of beauties of the danger of running after so well favoured a cavalier?

"It is all because I am a woman," said Barbara, with a little sigh. "I suppose I ought to be happy, proud, pleased; and yet--"

She looked across the woods, far away into the blue distance where fancy well might have its kingdom, and her thoughts became a day-dream. That she was a woman, that the horizon of her mind had widened, that in touching the great world she had understood things which before were a sealed book to her, did not altogether account for the change. In her day-dream she was conscious of a pair of grey eyes which seemed to look into her soul; conscious of a voice--kindly, yet with something stern in it--saying in her ear: "Can I be of service?" and again, "This is no place for a woman."

It was strange that she should remember so vividly; strange, too, that he had gone from her so quickly. Why had he done so? Who was he? Such questions brought another in their train. Why had the voice of the highwayman with the brown mask seemed familiar? She tried to remember the exact figure of the man who had come to her rescue at Newgate, her fair brow frowning a little with the endeavour, but only the look in his eyes and the sound of his voice remained. Somehow the highwayman's voice had seemed unnatural.

The opening and closing of a door startled her, and she turned quickly to see her uncle crossing the terrace.

"It is surprising to find you alone in these days, Barbara. London has worked marvels, and it would seem that you have become a reigning toast, Such is the news that has filtered down to Aylingford."

"That may be my misfortune; it is certainly none of my choice," was her answer.

"And she has grown as quick at repartee as the best of them," laughed Sir John, touching her shoulder lightly with approval. His laugh was a pleasant one, his face kindly, his pose rather graceful, in spite of the fact that his increasing bulk gave him anxiety. Report declared that his youth had had wild passages, that one episode in his career had led to a duel in which Sir John had killed his man, and it was whispered at the time that justice and honour had gone down before the better swordsmanship of a libertine. But this was years ago, before he was master of Aylingford Abbey, and was forgotten now. Sir John Lanison of Aylingford seemed to have nothing in common with that young roysterer of long ago, and to-day there was no more popular man in this corner of

Hampshire.

"Indeed, I had to run away to be alone this morning," Barbara went on. "I saw Judge Marriott go into the woods yonder not long since, and I warrant he is looking for me."

"And Branksome, and Fellowes, and half a dozen more--they are always seeking you," said Sir John, with mock consternation. "I am to have my hands full, it seems, looking after my niece. It might have been better if I had kept her at the Abbey."

"In my absence I have seen enough of men to make me careful about falling in love with one."

"Still, it must needs be with a man if you fall in love at all," said her uncle, seating himself on the stone seat beside her, "and there is something I want to say on this matter, Barbara. It is well that you should have seen something of the town, but it is not a good place in which to judge men."

"And around Aylingford I know of no men worth troubling about," said Barbara, "so it would seem that I am on the high road to dying a spinster."

"Never was woman more unlikely to do that than you," answered Sir John. "When a young girl talks like that, an old campaigner like myself begins to wonder in which direction her heart has fluttered. No woman ever yet regarded being a spinster with complacency, and few women jest about it unless they are satisfied there is no danger. Is there a confession to be made, Barbara?"

"None. Except for you and Martin Fairley, all men are--well, just men, and of little interest to me. It is certain I cannot marry my uncle, and I am not likely to fall in love with Martin, am I? By the way, where is Martin? I have not seen him since I returned to the Abbey."

"I met him just a week ago, here on the terrace, with his fiddle under his arm. He was starting to tramp to the other end of the county, he told me, to play at a village wedding."

"Poor Martin!" said the girl.

"Mad Martin, rather," said Sir John; "and yet not so mad that he has not had a certain effect upon us all, and upon you most of all. Ever since you were a child he has been your willing slave, and he has taught you many things out of that strange brain of his. I sometimes fancy that he has made you look upon life differently from the way in which most women look upon it, has filled it with more romance than it can hold, and taken out of it much that is real."

"In fact, made me as mad as he is," laughed Barbara.

"I am not jesting," Sir John said gravely. "You have come back to the Abbey a woman. You are more beautiful than I thought you were. You have made something of a sensation. You say you have no confession to make."

"That I have no confession to make is true, and for the other items I am glad I please you."

"But you do not please me," returned Sir John. "I should have been more gratified had you made a confession. I have no son, Barbara."

She put her hand upon his arm in a quick caress, full of sympathy, knowing how sore a trouble this was to him.

"So you see my interests are centred in you," he went on after a moment's pause which served to intensify the meaning in his words. "One of those interests--indeed, the chiefest of them--is your marriage. It must be a wise marriage, Barbara, one worthy of a Lanison. Have you never thought of it at all?"

"Never, definitely."

"And yet it is time."

"Yesterday I was a child," she answered, her eyes looking towards the distant hills. A pair of grey eyes seemed to be watching her.

"You were born before your mother was your age," Sir John answered. "I was prepared to look with favour upon any man on whom your choice had fallen. It has fallen on no one, you say."

"I have said so. We must wait a little while. I am very happy as I am."

"I have been thinking for you," said her uncle.

"You mean--Surely you don't want me to marry Judge Marriott?"

"No, Barbara," and he smiled. "I am too young myself yet to care for the judge as a nephew."

"Ah! We are talking absurdly, aren't we?" she said, and although she laughed she still looked towards the distant hills. "Of course, I could never marry a man I didn't love, and to have a man chosen for you would naturally prevent your loving him, wouldn't it?"

"To advise is not to force, Barbara."

"Who is the man you have thought of?" she asked.

"You cannot guess?"

"Has he grey eyes and a low, strong voice and--"

"Grey eyes!" said Sir John, glancing at her sharply.

"Grey eyes--yes." She had spoken dreamily, only half conscious that she had put thoughts into words. Now she laughed and went on gaily, "I have always thought I should like to marry a man with grey eyes. Girls get fancies like that sometimes. Foolish, isn't it?"

Sir John lifted his shoulders a little as though the point were too trivial to discuss, and he tried to remember what coloured eyes young Sydney Fellowes had.

"I am not sure whether Lord Rosmore's eyes are grey or not; I rather think they are," he said slowly.

"Lord Rosmore!"

Laughter sounded along the terrace, and several people came towards them, Lord Rosmore and Sydney Fellowes amongst them.

"If his eyes are grey, they are not the shade I like," said Barbara decidedly, and as Sir John rose she turned and walked along the terrace in the opposite direction. If her uncle were annoyed at her action he did not show it as he went to meet his guests.

"I was taking a quiet half-hour to discuss matters with the chatelaine of the Abbey," he said. "She will worry over small details more than is needful."

"Perhaps if I go and read her some new verses it will soothe her," said Fellowes.

"Better wait a more convenient season, unless you would have some of the servants for your audience," laughed Sir John, as he turned to walk with Rosmore. "You would find her engaged with them, and domesticities go ill with poetry."

"Plagued ill with the poetry Fellowes writes," said Branksome; "is that not true, Mistress Dearmer?"

"I am no judge, since Mr. Fellowes has never made verses for me," answered the lady.

"So facile a poet may remedy that on the instant," said Branksome. "Come, Master Rhymster, there's a kiss from the reddest lips I know waiting as payment for a stanza."

"They are kisses which are not at your disposal," answered the lady, but she looked at Fellowes.

"Gad! I believe you may have the kiss without the trouble of earning it, Fellowes," laughed Branksome. "I can go bail for the goods."

Mistress Dearmer pouted, but the laugh was against her until Fellowes came to the rescue.

"You shall have a sonnet," he said. "You may pay if you think it worthy."

Another woman caught Sir Philip's hand and whispered, "The poetry could hardly be so bad as the kisses are cheap, could it?"

Lord Rosmore and his host had walked to the end of the terrace talking confidentially.

"I should have said more, but you came to interrupt us," Sir John replied in answer to a question from his companion.

"You can force her to do as you wish," said Rosmore. "Indeed, if necessary, you must."

"How?"

"You are her guardian. If your powers are limited, that is no reason you

should tell her so."

"You seem strangely doubtful about your own powers, Rosmore, yet rumour has it that few women are proof against you."

"She may be one of the few, that is why you have spoken to her. I want her more than I have ever wanted anything on earth. You--well, if all else fails, you must force her to marry me."

"There is another alternative," and Sir John stopped and drew himself up stiffly.

"I don't think you would take it," Rosmore answered carelessly. "I should not advise you to take it."

"She spoke of grey eyes," said Sir John, as though he were disinclined to argue the point. "She has thought of some man with grey eyes."

"Tell me all she said--it may be useful," and for some minutes Rosmore listened attentively while Sir John talked.

"I have more than one way of wooing," Rosmore said presently, "and my love must condone them all. The siege shall begin forthwith. A man may win any woman if he is subtle enough; in that conviction lies the secret of the success with which rumour credits me. I may persuade your niece to believe my eyes are grey, or perchance charm her into hating grey eyes henceforth. Where shall I find her, Sir John?"

"Probably in the Nun's Room."

"No place for so desirable a lady, and surely a strange room to have in Aylingford Abbey," laughed Rosmore. "There are many strange things about Aylingford which Mistress Barbara must never discover."

Sir John laughed, a forced laugh with a curse underneath it, and his hands tightened a little as he watched his guest go quickly along the terrace.

CHAPTER IV

THE NUN OF AYLINGFORD

Before she had taken many steps Barbara regretted that she had not remained with her uncle. Lord Rosmore must have said something to Sir John, and would guess that they had been talking about him; it would have been better to have stayed and shown him by her manner how distasteful the subject was to her. But she did not turn back. If she had missed an opportunity, it was certain that many more would be given her. She even began to wonder whether she really disliked Lord Rosmore; he had certainly given her no definite cause. In London he had not attempted to pay her any marked attention, and last night, when he had bent low over her hand, was the first time there had been anything noticeable in his behaviour. She liked him better--far better--than Judge Marriott; Sydney Fellowes hardly counted, and there was no other man whose coming had pleased her or whose departure had caused her a

single regret. The man who had come to her help at Newgate was a shadow, a dream. Only curiosity could account for her remembering him. Indeed, it was doubtful if she did really remember him; were she to meet him she would probably not know him again. No, she had no ground for disliking Lord Rosmore. She did not dislike him, but, since he had been chosen for her, there was ample reason why she could never love him. Any woman would naturally hate the man she was commanded to love.

She turned from the terrace and, passing through a low doorway from which the door had gone long ago, entered a wide space enclosed by ruinous and moss-grown walls. It was open to the sky and littered with _debris_. At one end the blocked-up entrance from the present house was distinctly visible; at the other a small door, deeply sunk into the massive masonry, gave entrance to a small round tower or bastion, which rose some feet above the walls and overhung the terrace. The tower had escaped ruin, almost accidentally it would seem, for there were no signs of any particular care having been expended upon it. This open space had evidently been chiefly occupied by a large hall, its floor a little lower than the terrace level, but adjoining the tower end of it there had been other rooms, for traces of stone steps could be seen in the wall. In one corner, too, there had been a room below the level of the floor--indeed, some of the stone flags still projected over it. Its walls, strong and dungeon-like, were built down some fifteen feet; two or three narrow slits piercing the outer wall in a sharp upward angle had evidently given this buried chamber a dim light, and the entrance to it could only have been from the top, probably by a trap door. Some _debris_ had fallen into it, but not very much, and creepers had sown themselves and, climbing over part of the walls to the top, had spread themselves over a portion of the floor of the hall.

Barbara picked her way across the fallen _debris_ and stood looking down into this hole for a few minutes. It seemed to possess a certain fascination for her, as though it were in some way connected with her history. Then she went to the small door in the tower. It was locked, and although she knocked several times, and stood back to look up at the narrow windows above her, there was no sound, and no one answered her summons. She sat down upon a fallen piece of stonework, and her thoughts troubled her. Truly, she had come back to a new life. Even that locked door seemed to have its significance. She did not remember ever to have found it fastened before when she really wanted to enter.

She turned at the sound of approaching footsteps, and then rose quickly to her feet.

"What a place to hide in!" exclaimed Lord Rosmore as he came towards her. "I have never had the curiosity to penetrate into this rubbish heap before, and behold I am rewarded by finding a jewel."

"I came here to be alone for a little while," she said.

"I came for the same reason."

"You did not follow me?" she asked, evident disbelief in her tone.

"I wish I could say that I had, if it would please you; but, alas! truth will out. I came to think and to get through a troubled hour where my fellows could not see me. In this, at least, we can sympathise with each other it would seem."

"We can talk plainly, perhaps; it will be best," she answered.

"At least, I can explain," said Rosmore; "but won't you be seated again? That is better," he went on as she sat down, "it seems to make confession of my fault easier. A little while since I spoke to your uncle about you. It was unwise, I know that now, but I did not think so then. Your position and your wealth seemed to make it the honourable thing to do. Sir John was kind enough to wish me good fortune, and I was content to wait. It was not my intention that Sir John should say anything to you, I did not imagine he would do so. Now, I learn that you have been pestered with my sentiments by proxy, that I have been forced to your notice. It is enough surely to make me seek solitude, where I may curse the hard fate that ruins me."

"I thought--"

"I dare not try and understand all you thought," Rosmore interrupted. "I can only suppose that Sir John meant to be kind, that in some sense he did not consider me an altogether unworthy alliance; but that I should ever have my wooing done for me--the idea is maddening! A man could not take a surer road to a woman's contempt."

"My uncle has made a mistake," said Barbara. "I understand, and you have my thanks for the explanation."

"And your forgiveness?"

"I hardly think I had become angry."

"You lift my trouble from me with generous hands," said Rosmore. "Truly, Sir John has made a mistake, his desire perhaps marring his judgment; but, as truly, I am your humble worshipper. No! please hear me out. In London I did not thrust myself upon you because I had wit enough to understand that professions with even a suspicion of lightness in them were distasteful to you; now, after what has occurred, I am at a disadvantage, and I have no intention of putting my happiness to the test at such an inopportune time. For the present look upon me as a friend who hopes presently to win a greater regard, and who is, meanwhile, always at your service."

"I thank you," Barbara said, and the man's nerves tingled as she rose and swept him a graceful curtsy. She had never looked more beautiful, never so desirable as at that moment. He had conquered so often and so carelessly that he could not think of failure now.

"So we are friends and our troubles gone," he said gaily. "They are lost in the _debris_ of this ruinous place. It is strange this part should have been left in ruins, while the rest of the Abbey has been so carefully rebuilt and preserved."

"It is because of the Nun of Aylingford."

"A nun! In an Abbey for monks?"

"Strange, but true. I thought everyone knew the story."

"No. Won't you tell it to me?"

"You must look into the Nun's Room first, Lord Rosmore," said Barbara,

and she was so interested in the legend that she forgot to ask herself whether she liked or disliked her companion as she led the way to the sunken stone chamber. "Be careful you do not stumble and fall into it, for it is said that death comes to such a stumbler within the year."

"A fable, of course?" he laughed.

"I have only known one man who fell in. He was helped out unhurt, but he died within the week. I should not like to fall."

"Give me your hand," he said.

"For your safety or for mine?" she returned. "I am used to this place, have loved it since I was a child; besides, it is said that the curse applies only to men. You see, the Nun had pity on her own sex."

Lord Rosmore's hand was still extended, but she did not take it.

"For thirteen years a woman lived in this dungeon. Under the creeper on yonder wall you can see the stone slab which was her bed. The floor of the hall shut her up almost in darkness, and from the hour she stepped down into this room she saw no human face, heard no human voice."

"You stand too close to the opening, Mistress Lanison. I pray you come back or take my hand."

Barbara stepped back and stood by the wall, facing him.

"Her story is a sad one, sad and cruel," she went on. "She had a lover, and an enemy who said he loved her. The lover--a knight of prowess--went to the wars, and on his return was told that the woman he worshipped was false. He sought for her from one end of the land to the other, still believing in her, until by some artifice he was brought to believe in her unfaithfulness. Life had lost all zest for him, and he came here at last, to Aylingford Abbey, to seek consolation in a life of religion. It was the enemy who had contrived to keep the lovers apart, telling the girl also that the knight in whom she trusted was untrue. How she discovered the lie I do not know, nor does it matter, but when she did she sought for him as he had sought for her. She heard at last that he had become a monk, and she presently came to seek him at Aylingford. Dressed in a monk's gown, she asked for him. They met, and were discovered by the Abbot just at the moment when she had almost persuaded him to forsake his vows for love of her. Religion had claimed him because a lie had deceived him, she argued; therefore no vow could really bind him. She argued in this way with the Abbot, too, who was a shrewd man and as cruel as death. The monk, he knew, was no longer a monk at heart; the woman had penetrated into the Abbey under a false guise--as a man. No punishment was too severe for such a sin, he said, and he used religious arguments which could certainly never find an echo in a merciful heaven. The woman was condemned and lowered into that room--a nun by force--and there for thirteen years she existed. Once a day sufficient food to keep her alive was given her through the trap, in such a manner that she should see no one, and never a word was spoken. The monk fought for her release in vain, and soon died, raving mad, it is said. When the nun died, she was carried to the woods beyond the stream and buried. Village legend has marked a tree, which they call 'Nun's Oak,' as her burying-place, but probably this is fancy. Ever since that time there has been a curse on this part of the Abbey, and that is why it has been allowed to go to ruin."

"A sad tale most sweetly told," said Lord Rosmore; "a tale to appeal to a lover."

"Or it may be to warn a woman how cruel men can be," Barbara answered.

"Some men, not all," he said gently. "The monk in the story went mad for love. Still, there is a warning, too, not to trust men over easily. The greatest villains have often good looks to recommend them and can deceive most easily."

"I think I could tell," said Barbara.

"I wonder," Rosmore answered slowly. "There is often a vein of romance in a woman which makes her blind. I have thought of this more than once when thinking of you."

"It would seem I have troubled you a great deal in one way or another, Lord Rosmore."

"Some day, when you have forgotten that you were inclined to hate me, I may tell you how much. Yet there is one thing I might tell you now, as a friend, in case there should be much of this vein of romance in you."

"Yes, as a friend."

"Newgate--the trial day of the highwayman, Galloping Hermit."

He spoke abruptly, after a moment's pause, and had his intention been to startle her he could hardly have employed a better method.

"I see you remember it," he said. "Lady Bolsover should not have taken you, it was no place for a woman--indeed, she and I almost quarrelled about it afterwards. You may remember I was with Lady Bolsover when that--that gentleman brought you out of the crowd, the mysterious person who did not want to be seen."

"Yes, I remember," she said quietly.

"A good-looking man, yet--"

"You knew him, Lord Rosmore?"

"Well enough to follow him; but I failed to find him."

"Why should you follow him?"

"You would hardly understand," he returned. "It is a matter concerned with politics. This you know, however, that the King has enemies. Monmouth plots in Holland, the Duke of Argyll is being defeated in Scotland. Well, Mistress Lanison, there are traitors and traitors--those that one may at least recognise as brave men, and others who are cowardly curs. Of the first is Argyll and, perhaps, Monmouth; of the second are those who promote rebellion from safe hiding-places, and never show themselves to take a hand in the fighting. There is a rascal hiding from the officers of justice now--one Danvers--who is of this second kind, a scurrious fellow who is willing to barter the lives of better men, but dares nothing himself. He is one of a gang. The man who came to your rescue at Newgate is a companion of his. I have wondered whether

you have seen him since."

"At least it was courteous of him to come to my rescue," Barbara said.

"Never was there a man yet who had not a good instinct on occasion. Besides, the basest of men would not fail to grasp the opportunity of doing a service to a beautiful woman."

"I was almost crying, and in that condition I am positively repulsive," she answered, almost as if she were angry at being spoken of as a beautiful woman. "What is the name of this man?"

"He calls himself Crosby--Gilbert Crosby. Probably he has no right to the name. He is a dangerous and a clever man--dangerous because he plots and schemes while other men act, clever because he skilfully manages to evade the law. Many people find it difficult to believe ill of him, for he has all the appearance of a courageous gentleman."

"I am among those people difficult to convince," said Barbara.

"Exactly, hence my warning," said Rosmore. "You noted how quickly he disappeared. He saw me, and had no desire to face a man who knows him for what he is. Those grey eyes of his were sharper than mine or he would not have escaped so easily."

Barbara glanced at him quickly, wondering how much of their conversation her uncle had repeated, but Lord Rosmore did not appear to notice her look.

"And if you had found him?" she asked.

"I should have forced a quarrel on some pretext or other, and so contrived that he could not have run away without giving me satisfaction. By killing him I should have done a public service, and, for my own honour, I should have snapped the sword I had been compelled to stain with the blood of so contemptible a person. You smile, Mistress Lanison. Why?"

"At your vindictiveness, and at a thought which came into my mind."

"May I know it?"

"I was wondering what this Mr.--did you say the name was Crosby?--would have done with his sword had he proved equal to reversing the issue of the quarrel."

"Ah! I wonder," and Lord Rosmore laughed, but not good-naturedly. "I have faith enough in my skill to believe that it can successfully defend you whenever you may have need of it."

She turned towards the doorway opening on to the terrace, but having taken two or three hasty steps, as if desirous of bringing the interview to a speedy end, she stopped and faced him:

"Lord Rosmore, this highwayman, this Galloping Hermit; he is not dead, you know that?"

"Judge Marriott will not allow us to forget it," he laughed. "Give him the slightest opportunity, and he will tell of his adventure on Burford

Heath half a dozen times in the day."

"Who is this Galloping Hermit?" Barbara asked, almost as though she expected a definite answer to the question.

"Could I satisfy that curiosity I should be quite a famous person," he said. "Scores of men envy him his reputation and half the women of fashion are in love with him."

"Is he this Gilbert Crosby, think you?"

"Why should you suggest such a thing?" Rosmore asked sharply. "Were they grey eyes which peeped through the brown mask that night?"

"I could not see; and, besides, I do not belong to that half of the women of fashion."

"Truly, if you did you would be in no bad company. I have a sneaking fondness for the fellow myself, and it has been my ill-fortune never to meet him. By all accounts he is a gallant scoundrel, with a nerve of iron, whereas Crosby--Oh, no, whoever Galloping Hermit may be, he is not Gilbert Crosby."

Lord Rosmore did not follow Barbara on to the terrace. He had made his peace with her, and had succeeded in establishing a definite understanding between them. She accepted his friendship--that counted for a great deal with such a woman. It would be strange if he could not turn it into love. Yet he was conscious that this was to be no easy triumph, no opportunity must be neglected, and his busy brain was full of schemes for bending circumstances to further his desires.

A little later, as he slowly crossed one of the stone bridges towards the woods, he saw Barbara sitting on the terrace, and Sydney Fellowes standing before her reading from sheets of paper in his hand.

"I cannot write verses to please her, that is certain," he mused. "She cannot care for Fellowes, his eyes are not grey. It is this fellow Crosby she thinks of, and of a highwayman, perhaps. A strange pair of rivals, truly! Sydney Fellowes might be useful, besides--" Some brilliant idea seemed to take sudden possession of him, for there was excitement in his step as he crossed the bridge quickly and disappeared into the woods beyond.

Neither Barbara nor Fellowes noticed Lord Rosmore, nor were either of them thinking of him. Fellowes was absorbed in reading his verses to the best advantage. Barbara, while apparently listening intently to her companion, was wondering if the man who had come more often into her thoughts than perhaps she had realised could possibly be a scoundrel and a coward.

CHAPTER V

CHILDREN OF THE DEVIL

Although Barbara Lanison had found that life at the Abbey was different

since her return from London, and had concluded that the true reason lay in the fact that she was now considered a woman, whereas before she had been looked upon as a child only, she did not at once appreciate how great the difference really was. Her uncle seemed a little doubtful how to treat her. He talked a great deal about her taking her place as mistress of the house, yet he made little attempt to have this position recognised. The guests, especially the women, while quite willing to admit her as one of themselves, did not even pretend to consider her their hostess, and, on the whole, Sir John seemed quite contented that they should not do so. He seemed rather relieved whenever Barbara withdrew herself from the general company, as she constantly did, and those who knew Sir John best found him more natural when his niece was not present.

Since she only saw him when, as his intimates declared, he was under a certain restraint, Barbara had not much opportunity of forming a clear judgment of her uncle. He had been very kind to her ever since she had come to Aylingford as a little child, and if his manner towards her had changed recently she hardly noticed it. Under the circumstances she would not easily be ready to criticise. But in the case of the guests the change was not only very marked, but increasingly so, particularly with the women. Whereas the men, chivalrous in spite of themselves, perhaps, showed her a certain amount of deference, the women seemed to resent her. It was so soon apparent that she had nothing in common with them that they appeared to combine to shock her. Mistress Dearmer led the laughter at what she termed Barbara's country manners and prudery. There were few things in heaven or earth exempt from the ridicule of Mrs. Dearmer's tongue, and it was a loose tongue, full of coarse tales and licentious wit. She was a pretty woman, which, from the men's point of view, seemed to add piquancy to her scandalous conversation, but the fact only made Barbara's ears tingle the more. Mrs. Dearmer was in the fashion; Barbara knew that, for even at Lady Bolsover's she had often been made to blush, but she had never heard in St. James's Square a tithe of the ribaldry which assailed her at the Abbey.

It was natural, perhaps, that Barbara Lanison should propound a problem to herself. Was she foolish to resent what was little more than the fashion of the day? These people were her uncle's guests, honoured guests surely, since they had come to Aylingford so often. Would he countenance anything to which there was any real objection? She would have asked him, but found no opportunity. For two or three days after his talk with her about Lord Rosmore she hardly saw him, and never for a moment alone. More guests arrived, and it was during these days that Mrs. Dearmer's conversation became more daring. On two occasions Barbara had got up and walked away, followed by a burst of laughter--she thought at her modesty, but it might have been at Mrs. Dearmer's tale.

On the second occasion Sydney Fellowes followed her as soon as he could do so without undue comment.

"Why did you go?" he asked.

"That woman maddens me."

"Yes, she is--the fact is, you ought not to be here."

"Not be here!" she exclaimed. "This is my home. It is she who ought not to be here. I shall speak to my uncle."

"Wait! Have a little patience," said Fellowes. "After all, she is Mrs. Dearmer, a lady of fashion, a lady who has been to Court. You would be astonished at the power she wields in certain directions. In these days the world is not censorious, and is apt to laugh at those who are."

"If you merely came to defend that woman, I am in the mood to like your absence better than your company."

"I hate her," Fellowes answered. "I think I hate all women now that I have known one beautiful, pure ideal. Oh, do not misunderstand me. I look up at a star to worship its dazzling brightness, and I would not have it come to earth for any purpose. You are too far removed from Mrs. Dearmer to understand her, nor can she possibly appreciate you. To fight her would be to fail, just now at any rate--even Sir John would laugh at you."

"You speak seriously?"

"Intentionally. I am a very debased fellow. A dozen men will tell you so, and women too for that matter, but I can appreciate the good, although I am incapable of rising to its level. I recognise it from the gutter, but I go on lying in the gutter. There is only one person on the earth who can pick me out and keep me out."

"I should not suppose there was a person in the world who would consider such a man worth such a labour," said Barbara.

"No doubt you are right, and that is why I must remain in the gutter."

He looked, in every way, so exactly the opposite of anyone doomed to such a resting-place that Barbara laughed.

"I suppose you know who that person is?" he said.

"At least I know that any woman would be a fool to attempt such an unprofitable task," she answered. "If I thought you were really speaking the truth, I should hate you. You would not be worthy the name of a man, and even a Mrs. Dearmer, in her more reasonable moments, would despise you."

Fellowes looked at her for a moment.

"I wish my mother had lived to make a better man of me," he said abruptly, and turned and left her.

Barbara had become so accustomed to Sydney Fellowes' sudden and changeable moods that she thought little of his words, or his manner of leaving her. Yet, to the man had come a sudden flash of repentance, not lasting but real enough for the moment, holding him until the next temptation came in his path. He did not seek his companions, but crossed one of the bridges, and plunged into the woods, cursing himself and feeling out of tune with the rest of the world. Two hours later he and Lord Rosmore came back together, slowly, and talking eagerly. Fellowes, like many other quite young men, had a profound admiration for Lord Rosmore, and his opinion upon any matter carried weight.

"You have not sufficient faith in yourself, Fellowes," Rosmore said as they crossed the bridge. "That is the trouble."

"It is easily remedied," was the answer.

"That is the spirit which brings victory," said Rosmore, patting his companion on the shoulder.

The guests who had arrived during the last two or three days had introduced a noisier and wilder element into the Abbey. Barbara was puzzled at her uncle's attitude, and retired from the company as much as possible. This evening she left early, pretending no excuse as hitherto she had done. She wanted her uncle to understand, and question her. Surely he must do so if she were rude to his guests. A burst of laughter followed her withdrawal.

"You must be a Puritan in disguise, Abbot John, to have such a niece," said Mrs. Dearmer; and then she turned and whispered something into the ear of Sir Philip Branksome that might have made him blush had he been capable of such a thing. Sir John seemed mightily entertained at the lady's suggestion. He laughed aloud, cursed Puritans generously, and drank deeply to their ultimate perdition.

There is ever some restraint in vice when virtue is present, but with Barbara's departure all restraint seemed to vanish. There were probably degrees in the viciousness of these men and women, but, as a whole, it would have been difficult to bring together a more abandoned company. High play was here, and the ruin of many a man's fortune. Honour, save of the spurious sort, held no man in check, and virtue was as dross. Debauchery of every kind was practised openly and unashamedly. Vice was enthroned in this temple, and her ribald followers bowed the head. This was Aylingford Abbey, built for worship long ago, therefore worship should be in it now. "We will be monks and nuns of the devil," some genius in wickedness had cried one evening, and the suggestion had been hailed with delight. This was their foundation, so they had called themselves ever since, and Sir John Lanison delighted to be the "Abbot" of such a community. They chose a sign whereby they might be known to one another in the world--the slow tracing of a circle on the forehead with the forefinger--and they bound themselves by an oath to their master to love him and all his works, and to eschew all that was called good. It had often been noticed how many persons of condition, who seemed to be at one with Sir John in politics, had never been offered the hospitality of Aylingford. The true reason had never been divulged. If, as had chanced on one or two occasions, guests had been there who knew nothing of these debaucheries, the devil's children present dissembled, and affected to yawn over the dull entertainment provided by Sir John. The secret of the Abbey had never leaked out, nor did it appear that any man or woman, desirous of betraying it, had ever found an entrance into the community. Once, a year ago, a woman had whispered her suspicion of a man, and he was found dead in his lodging in Pall Mall before he had time to speak of what he knew, even if he intended to do so.

As he was popular in the county, passing for a God-fearing gentleman, so Sir John Lanison was popular as the devil's "Abbot." There were few who could surpass him in wickedness, but he was a man of moods, and there were times when fear peered out of his eyes. He was superstitious, finding omens when he gambled at basset, and premonitions in all manner of foolish signs. He had played this evening with ill success, he had drunk deeply, and was inclined to be quarrelsome.

"The Abbot is wanting to make us all do penance," laughed Fellowes, who

some time since had parted with sobriety. "I'll read him these verses to pacify him; they would make an angry devil collapse into a chuckle. Mrs. Dearmer inspired them, so you may guess how wicked they are."

"Always verses--nothing but verses," said Rosmore, who had drunk little and seemed to watch his companions with amusement.

"No woman was ever won by poetry," said a girl in Fellowes' ear. "Try some other way."

"What way?"

The girl whispered to him, laughing the while. She was very pretty, very innocent to look upon.

"Women must be carried by assault, gloriously, as a besieged city is," roared Branksome from the other end of the room. "The lover who attempts to starve them into surrender is a fool, and gets ridiculed for his pains. What do you say, Rosmore?"

"Nothing. There are many ladies who can explain my methods better than I can."

Mrs. Dearmer laughed, and desired a lesson forthwith.

"My dear lady, there would be too many lovers to call me to account for my presumption," Rosmore answered.

"Branksome is right," said Mrs. Dearmer. "Take a woman by force or not at all. She loves a desperate man. His desperation and overriding of all convention do homage to her. I never yet met the virtue that could stand against such an assault."

"She is right, Sydney," whispered the girl to Fellowes, her hands suddenly clasped round his arm.

Fellowes looked down into her face, and a strange expression came into his own.

"I believe she is," he said almost passionately. "I believe she is. There's no woman so virtuous that--"

"None," whispered the girl.

Fellowes laughed, and shook himself free from her.

"I'll drink to success, and then--" He stumbled as he rose to his feet, and, recovering himself, laughed at Sir John. "You shall have the verses another time, Abbot; I have other things to do just now."

He called a servant, and talked to him in a low voice.

"Yes, blockhead, I said the hall," he exclaimed in a louder voice. "The hall in ten minutes, and if she isn't there I'll come and let the life out of you for a lazy scoundrel who cannot carry a message. A drink with you, reverend Abbot--a liquid benediction on me."

Lord Rosmore watched him, but Sir John took no notice of him. Sir John's thoughts were wandering, and had anyone been watching him closely they

might have seen fear looking out of his eyes. A candle on a table near him spluttered and burnt crookedly.

"That means disaster," he muttered, and then he turned to Lord Rosmore fiercely, though he spoke in an undertone. "You were a fool to let me bring her back."

It was evident that he had made a similar statement to his companion before, for Rosmore showed no surprise or ignorance of his meaning.

"I shall take her away presently, her lover and deliverer. In this case it is the best method."

"And let her curse me?"

"No. I shall promise to deliver you and bring about your redemption."

"A devilish method," said Sir John.

"One must work with the tools that are to hand," said Rosmore with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But when? When?"

"Perhaps in a few short hours. Wait! Wait, Sir John. It seems to me that opportunity is in the air to-night."

"And disaster," said Sir John, glancing at the spluttering candle. Lord Rosmore made no comment--perhaps did not hear the words, for he was intent upon watching Sydney Fellowes, who was standing near a door which opened into the hall. No one else appeared to notice him, not even the pretty girl he had spurned. She was too much engaged in consoling a youth who had lost heavily at basset.

Barbara was dull in her room. The silence was oppressive, for no sounds of the riotous company reached her there, and the pale moonlight on the terrace below, and over the sleeping woods, seemed to throw a mist of sadness over the world. She had opened the casement, and for a time had puzzled over her uncle and his strange guests. Something must be going forward at the Abbey of which she was ignorant. Sydney Fellowes must know this, and there had been more meaning in his words than she had imagined. Why ought she not to be at the Abbey? And then her thoughts wandered to another man who had found her in a place where no woman ought to be, and she remembered all Lord Rosmore had said about him. Looking out on the quiet, sleeping world, so full of mystery and the unknown, it was easy to fall into a reverie, to indulge in speculations which, waking again, she would hardly remember; easy to lose all count of time. Once, at some distance along the terrace towards the servants' quarters, there was the sound of slow footsteps and a low laugh. There were two shadows in the moonlight--a man's and a woman's. Some serving maid had found love, for the low laugh was a happy one, and some man, perchance no more than a groom, had suddenly become a hero in a girl's eyes. Unconsciously perhaps, Barbara sighed. That girl was happier than she was.

A gentle knock came at her door, and a man stood there.

"Mr. Fellowes sent me. Will you see him in the hall in ten minutes. It is important; he must see you. 'It is for your own sake.' Those were his

own words, madam."

Barbara received the message, but gave no answer, and the man departed. Had the message come from anyone but Sydney Fellowes she would have taken no notice of it, but, remembering what he had said to her, this request assumed importance. She was more likely to discover the truth about the Abbey from Sydney Fellowes than from anyone else.

There was only a dim light in the great hall--candles upon a table at the far end. The moonlight came through the painted windows, staining the stone floor here and there with misty colours. There was no movement near her, but the sound of voices and laughter came from the chamber beyond--the one from which she had angrily departed some time ago. Now the voices were hushed to a murmur, now they were loud, and the laughter was irresponsible. How she hated the sound of it, and that shriller note, peculiarly persistent for a moment, was Mrs. Dearmer's. No Christian feeling could prevent her from hating that woman.

Barbara crossed to the wide hearth and waited.

A door opened suddenly; there was the rustling of the curtain which hung over it being thrust aside, a shaft of light shot across the hall for a moment, and the sounds of voices and laughter were loud, then the door closed again sharply. There were a few hasty steps, and then silence.

"You sent me a message, Mr. Fellowes."

In a moment he was beside her.

"Barbara!"

She stepped back as though the sound of her own name startled her.

"I love you. Women were made for love--you above all women. You think I can only scribble poetry--you are wrong! I mean to--Barbara, my Barbara!"

"You insult me, Mr. Fellowes."

He caught her in his arms as she turned away from him.

"Insult! Nonsense! Love insults no woman. You are mine--mine! I take you as it is right a man should take a woman."

She struggled to free herself, but could not. She did not want to cry out.

"You remembered your mother to-day, remember her now," she panted.

The wine fumes were in his head, confusion in his brain; reason had left her seat for a while, and truth was distorted.

"I do remember her," he answered, speaking low but wildly. "She was a woman. A man took her, as I take you; wooed her, loved her as I love you. I do remember--that is why you are mine to-night."

She struggled again. She did not want to cry out. There was no man in that room she wished to call upon to defend her--not even her uncle. Evil seemed to surround her. Had any other man touched her like this,

she would have called to Sydney Fellowes, so far had she believed in him and trusted him.

"Barbara, you shall love me!" he went on, holding her so that she was powerless. "Love shall be sealed, my lips on yours."

"Help! Save me from this man!" Her fierce, angry cry woke the echoes. In a moment there was the sound of hurrying feet, the sudden opening of a door, and again a shaft of light cut through the hall. Men and women rushed in from the adjoining room with loud and eager inquiry. Then Sir John, closely followed by Lord Rosmore.

"Quick! More lights!" he said. "Who is it screaming for help?"

"Is it some serving-maid in distress?" cried Branksome.

"Or a fool too honest to be kissed," laughed a woman.

"Barbara!" Sir John's exclamation was almost a whisper. Lights were in the hall now, brought hastily from the room beyond. Some had been put down in the first place that offered, some were still held by the guests. Fellowes had turned to face this wild interruption, and Barbara had wrenched herself free from his arms as he did so.

"A love passage!" laughed Fellowes. "Why interfere?"

"He insulted me!" said Barbara.

"My niece is--"

"Leave this to me, Sir John," said Rosmore, laying a hand upon his shoulder.

"That's right, Rosmore, and leave me to my wooing," cried Fellowes.

"You cur! You shall repent this night's folly," said Rosmore.

"Excellent! Excellent! You should have been a mummer. This is glorious comedy!" and Fellowes laughed aloud. "What! A hint of tragedy in it, too!"

A naked sword was in Rosmore's hand.

"A woman's honour must be defended," hissed Rosmore.

"Gad! I'll not spoil the play for want of pantomime," cried Fellowes, still laughing. "Why don't you all laugh at such excellent fooling?"

"There is no laughter in this," said Rosmore, and Fellowes' face grew suddenly serious.

"This is real? You mean it?" he said.

"I mean it."

"Devil's whelp that you are!" Fellowes cried. "Between two scoundrels may God help the least debased."

In an instant there was the ring of steel and the quick flash of the

blades as the light caught them.

Sir John had made a step forward to interfere, but had hesitated and stopped. No one else moved, and there was silence as steel touched steel--breathless silence. For a moment Barbara was hardly conscious of what was happening about her. It seemed only an instant ago that she had cried out, and now naked swords and the shadow of death. Lord Rosmore's face looked evil, sinister, devilish. Fellowes was flushed with wine, unsteady, taken by surprise. There came to Barbara the sudden conviction that in some manner Fellowes had fallen into a trap. He had insulted her, but the wine was the cause, and Rosmore had seized the opportunity for his own ends. She tried to speak, but could not. There was a fierce lunge, real and deadly meaning in it, an unsteady parry which barely turned swift death aside, and then a sudden low sound from several voices, and an excited shuffle of feet. Barbara had rushed forward and thrown herself between the fighters.

"This is mere trickery," she cried. "You play a coward's part, my lord, fighting with a drunken man."

"He insulted you--that sufficed for me."

"I did not ask you to punish him," she answered.

She faced Lord Rosmore, shielding Fellowes, who was behind her. Now Fellowes gently touched her arm.

"Grant me your pardon, Mistress Lanison, and then let me pay the penalty," he said.

She had thrust out her arm to keep him behind her, when the big door at the end of the hall opening on to the terrace was flung open, and on the threshold stood a tall figure, dark and distinct against the moonlit world beyond. His garments were of nondescript fashion, but his pose was not without grace. Under one arm he carried a fiddle, and the bow was in his hand. He raised it and waved it in a sort of benediction.

"Give you greeting, ladies and gentlemen--and news besides. Monmouth has landed at Lyme, and all the West Country is aflame with rebellion."

CHAPTER VI

MAD MARTIN

The sudden interruption served to relax the tension in the hall. There was the quick shuffling of feet, as though these men and women had suddenly been released from some power which had struck them motionless, and eager faces were turned towards the doorway. Barbara did not move. Her eyes were still fixed on Lord Rosmore's face, her arm was still outstretched to prevent a renewal of the fight.

The man stood in the doorway for a moment with his bow raised, pleased, it seemed, with the sensation he had caused. He had spoken in rather a high-pitched voice, almost as if his words were set to a monotonous chant or had a poetic measure in them.

"It is only that mad fool Martin Fairley," said Branksome.

"What is this news?" Sir John asked. His anger seemed to have gone, and he spoke gently.

"That depends," said Martin, advancing into the hall with a step which appeared to time itself with some unheard rhythm. "That depends on who it is who hears it. Good news for those who hate King James; bad for those who love priests and popery. How can such a mad fool as I am, Sir Philip Branksome, guess to which side so many gallant gentlemen and fair ladies may lean?"

There was grace, and some mockery perhaps, in the low bow he made, his arms wide extended, the fiddle in one hand, the bow in the other; and then, slowly standing erect again, he appeared to notice Barbara for the first time.

"Drawn swords!" he exclaimed, "and my lady of Aylingford between them. Another legend for the Abbey in the making--eh, Sir John? I must write a song upon it, or else Mr. Fellowes shall. If his sword is as facile as his pen, my Lord Rosmore, 'tis a marvel you are alive."

"This fool annoys me, Sir John. I am not in the mood for jesting."

"That, at least, is good news," said Martin, "for in this Monmouth affair there is no jest but real fighting to be done. Will you not save your strength for one side or the other?"

"Peace, Martin," said Sir John. "We must hear more of this news of yours at once. And you, gentlemen, will you not put up your swords at my niece's request?"

"I drew it to play a dishonourable part," said Fellowes. "I used it to defend a worthless life. Do you command its sheathing, Mistress Lanison?"

"Yes," and she still looked at Lord Rosmore as she spoke.

"Since Mr. Fellowes has apologised, and you have commanded, I have no alternative," said Rosmore. "If Mr. Fellowes resents my attitude he may find a time and an opportunity to force me to a better one."

"Come, Martin, we must hear the whole story," said Sir John, and then he whispered to Rosmore as they crossed the hall together: "He is certain to be right, Martin invariably hears news, good or bad, before anyone else."

"May we all hear it?" asked Mrs. Dearmer.

"Why, surely," Martin Fairley exclaimed. "Monmouth was always interesting to ladies, and he may, as likely as not, set up his court at St. James's before another moon is at the full."

They followed Sir John and Lord Rosmore back into the room which they had left so hurriedly a few moments ago, and as Martin Fairley went in after them he drew his bow across the strings of his fiddle, sounding just half a dozen quick notes in a little laughing cadenza.

"He is going to sing his tale to us," said Branksome, rather bored with

the whole proceeding.

"He is quite mad," answered Mrs. Dearmer, "but I fancy Abbot John is somewhat afraid of him."

The little sequence of notes made Barbara Lanison start, she had heard it so often. When she was a child Martin had told her fairy tales, and he constantly finished the story by playing just these notes, a sort of musical comment to the end of a tale in which prince and princess lived happily ever afterwards. When he had been thinking out some difficult point he would play this cadenza as a sign that he had come to a decision. Once when Barbara had been ill, and got well again, he had played it two or three times in rapid succession. If he declared he was busy when Barbara wanted to go to him, he would tell her she might come when she heard his fiddle laugh, and these notes were the laugh, always the same notes. They had evidently some meaning for him, and they had come to have a meaning for Barbara. They were a link between her and this strange mad friend of hers. When she heard them she always felt that Martin had something to tell her, or could help her in any difficulty she was in at the moment.

"Mistress Lanison."

She started. She was almost unconscious that the people who had surrounded her just now had gone and closed the door. She was alone in the hall with Sydney Fellowes, from whom a few moments ago she had cried out to be delivered.

"Mistress Lanison, I ask your pardon for to-night. Forget it, blot it out of your memory, if you can. If some day you would deign to set me a task whereby I might prove my repentance, I swear you shall be humbly served. Against your will, perhaps, you have picked me out of the gutter. Please God, I'll keep out of it. Thank you for all you have done for me."

He spoke hurriedly, giving her no opportunity to answer him, and then turned and left her, going out through the door which opened on to the terrace, and which still stood open. Had he waited Barbara would not have answered him, perhaps; she was not thinking of him, but of Martin Fairley and the laugh of his fiddle. The sound of Fellowes's retreating footsteps had died into silence before she turned and went out slowly on to the terrace, closing the door quietly behind her.

The fiddle, with the bow beside it, lay on the table near its master, a strange master, whose moods were as varying as are those of an April day. Mad Martin he was called, and he was known and loved in all the villages for miles round Aylingford. He and his fiddle brought mirth to many a simple festival, and in time of trouble it was strange how helpful were the words and presence of this madman. Martin Fairley was not as other men, the village folk said, he was not sane and ordinary as they were, he was to be pitied, and must often be treated as a wayward child. Yet there were times when he seemed to see visions, when the invisible spirits of that world with which he was in touch whispered into his ear things of which men knew nothing. He was suddenly endowed with knowledge above his fellows, and the whole aspect of the man changed. At such times the villagers were a little afraid of him and spoke under their breath of magic and the black art. Even Sir John Lanison was not free from this fear of his strange dependent. He never spoke roughly to him, never checked him, never questioned his goings and

comings. Sometimes, half-jestingly it seemed, he asked his advice, and whatever Martin said was always considered. As often as not the advice given took the form of a parable, and, no matter how absurd it sounded, Sir John invariably tried to understand its meaning.

Martin Fairley had come to the Abbey one winter's night soon after Barbara Lanison had been brought there. He had come out of the woods, struggling against a hurricane of wind across one of the bridges, his fiddle cuddled in his arms for protection. He had begged for food and shelter, and then, warm and satisfied, he had played to the company gathered round the Abbey fire, had told them strange tales, and, with a light laugh, had declared that he was the second child to come to the good Sir John Lanison for care and protection, first the little niece, now the poor fool. Someone told Sir John that there was luck in keeping such a fool about the place, and whether it was that he believed it, or really felt pity for the homeless wanderer, Martin Fairley had been allowed to remain at the Abbey ever since, a willing slave to Barbara Lanison, an inconsequent person who must not be interfered with. Perhaps he was twenty years old when he came, strong and lithe of limb then, and to-day he was hardly changed, older-looking, of course, but still lithe in his movements. Mentally, his development had been curious. His powers had both increased and decreased. There were times when he was silent, depressed, when his mind was a complete blank, and whatever words he might utter were totally without meaning; but there were other times when his eyes were alight with intelligence, when his wit was as keen as a well-tempered blade, and his whole appearance one of resolute energy and competent action.

He was keen to-night as he told the story of Monmouth's landing.

"Lyme went mad at his coming," he said. "His address was read from the market cross, and the air rang again with shouts of 'Monmouth! and the Protestant faith!' As captain-general of that faith has he come, and the people flock to his blue standard and scatter flowers in his path. The Whig aristocracy will rise to a man, it is said, and London fly to arms. The King and his Parliament tremble and turn pale, and the train-bands of Devon are only awaiting the opportunity to join the Duke. All the West is in arms."

"How did you hear the news?" asked Sir John.

"It flies in all directions; you have only to listen."

"We have heard nothing," said Rosmore contemptuously.

"Ah, but these walls are thick," said Martin, "and wine makes people dull of hearing, while the company of fair ladies breeds disinclination to hear. Perhaps, too, you were making a noise over your play."

"I am inclined to think it is all a tale," said Branksome. "Before this we have known you to dream prodigiously, Martin."

"True. I dreamed last night as I lay on a bed of hay in a loft, with my fiddle for company, that all the gentleman at the Abbey had flown to fight for Monmouth."

"A stupid dream," said a man who was a Whig, and whose mind was full of doubt as to what his course of action must be should Monmouth's landing be a fact.

"And I come back to find two gentlemen fighting in the hall," Martin went on. "Were you trying to rob King James of a supporter, my lord?"

Rosmore laughed.

"No, Martin; I was endeavouring to punish a man for insulting a lady."

"Truly the world is upside down when it falls to your lot to play such a part as that," was the answer.

"How many men has Monmouth?" asked Sir John, silencing the laugh against Lord Rosmore.

"They come by the hundreds, 'tis a labour to write down their names fast enough. From the ploughs, from the fields, from the shops they come; their tools turned into implements of war even as Israel faced the Philistines long ago. Men cut loose the horses from the carts and turn them into chargers; labourers bind their scythes to poles and carry reaping-hooks for swords; the Mendip miners shoulder their picks making a brave front; and here and there a clerk may wield a ruler for want of a better weapon. And night and day they drill, march, and countermarch. The cause is at their heart and no leader need feel shame at such a host."

"A rabble," said Rosmore.

"A rabble that will not run counts for much, my lord, and Monmouth is no mean general as those who fought at Bothwell Bridge know well."

"You talk as though you were a messenger from Monmouth himself," said Rosmore. "Were you a witness of the landing?"

"No, no; my fiddle and I have been to a wedding--besides, I am far too changeable a fellow to take sides," said Martin. "Were I for Monmouth to-night, I might wake to-morrow morning and find myself for King James. I shall make a song of victory so worded that it will serve for either side. Were I Monmouth's messenger I should have made certain of my company before telling my news. You may all be for the King; that would be to send you marching against Monmouth. He does not want such a messenger as I am. Do you march early to-morrow, Sir John?"

"Not so soon as that, I think, Martin."

"And you, Lord Rosmore?"

"Is it worth while marching at all against such a rabble?" was the answer.

Martin took up his fiddle.

"You, Sir Philip, will hardly leave the ladies, I suppose? Like me, you are no fighting man."

Sir Philip Branksome chose to consider himself a very great fighting man, and every acquaintance he had knew it. His angry retort was drowned in the laughter which assailed him on all sides, and by the time the laughter had ended Martin Fairley had left the room.

"That madman knows too much," said Rosmore, turning to Sir John. "You give him too great licence. Had I anything to do with him I should slit that wagging tongue of his."

"He talks too freely to be dangerous," said Sir John. "His news is doubtless true, and we--which side do we favour?"

Mrs. Dearmer propounded a question.

"Does it not depend upon which is the good? If popery, then Monmouth and the Protestants claim us; if Protestantism, then must we die for King James and all the evil he meditates."

"A fair abbess reminding us of our rules," said Branksome. "Would not the most wicked course be to do nothing, and then side with the victor?"

"That madman seems to have spoken shrewdly when he said you did not like fighting," said a girl beside him.

"There is evil to be done whichever side we fight for," said Rosmore. "I see more personal advantage in fighting for King James, and should anyone be able to persuade Fellowes to throw in his lot with Monmouth he will do me a service. The world grows too small to hold us both."

"At least I hope that all my lovers will not fall victims to the rabble," said Mrs. Dearmer. "Abbot John, you at least must stay at the Abbey to keep me merry."

* * * * *

Martin Fairley tucked his fiddle under his arm and went quickly down the terrace. As he approached the doorway leading into the ruined hall a man came out of the shadows.

"My brother poet!" Martin exclaimed. "You have left the revel early, brother!"

"Can you be serious, Martin, and understand me clearly?" asked Fellowes.

"It happens that I am rather serious just now," was the answer.

"Martin, I was a scoundrel to-night," said Fellowes, catching him by the arm. "I might plead wine as an excuse, but I will not, or love, which I dare not. All women are to be won, you know the roue's damnable creed. I was in despair; a few words from a pure woman's lips had convinced me of my unworthiness, and then I met Rosmore. He ridiculed me; suggested, even, that my love was returned, goaded me to play the lover wilfully and as a man who will not be beaten. Then the wine and the sham courage that is in it drove me on. I sent a lying message, and she came to the hall yonder. I would not let her go, and she cried out. In a moment they came hurrying in upon us, Rosmore with them. They would have turned it to comedy, laughed at her, applauded me; but Rosmore, Martin, drew his sword to defend her--he had played for the opportunity. Had any other man but Rosmore faced me I should say nothing, but he is worse even than I am. You saw the end."

"She was shielding you," said Martin.

"I know. I do not count, but Rosmore desires her, Martin. He thought to

stand high with her by killing me to-night. She must never belong to Lord Rosmore. She will listen to you, Martin--she always does, she always has."

"Would you make a Cupid's messenger of me, Mr. Fellowes?"

"Fool! I tell you I am nothing. Save her from Rosmore, that is your mission. My sword, my life are at her service, she knows that, and probably would not use them, no matter what her peril might be; but you, some day, might use me on her behalf, without her knowledge. Take this paper; it is the name of my lodging in town. Keep it. Do you understand? To-morrow I leave the Abbey."

"To join Monmouth?"

"To try and do what is right," Fellowes answered, "and find a worthy death, if possible, to atone for an unworthy life."

"A new day will change your mood," said Martin.

"Think so if you will, only keep the paper, and save her from Rosmore."

As he turned away Martin caught his arm.

"There was once a man like you," he said, "a man who loved like you, who was a scoundrel like you. Suddenly an angel touched him, and in great pain he turned aside into a rugged, difficult path. At the end of it he shrank back at the sound of a voice, shrank back until he knew that the voice spoke words of praise and confidence and honour; and a hand, clean as men's hands seldom are, grasped his in friendship."

The madman's hand was stretched out to him, and Fellowes took it.

"The eyes of a fool often see into the future," said Martin. "I am grasping the hand of the man you are to be. I shall keep the paper."

Fellowes went along the terrace without another word, and Martin went to the deep-set door in the tower by the Nun's Room. It was not locked to-night, and he climbed the narrow, winding stair quickly.

A dim light was burning in the circular chamber, and as Martin entered Barbara rose from a chair to meet him. Swiftly he drew the bow across the fiddle strings.

"The fiddle laughs at your trouble, child."

"It must not be laughed at so easily, Martin. Your news to-night--"

"Was just in time to save a very foolish man from my Lord Rosmore. I can guess what happened. The one insults you, the other pretends to defend you and--"

"And my uncle wishes me to marry him; but that is not the trouble, Martin."

"I should have called that trouble enough."

"But listen," said Barbara, "this news of Monmouth's landing distresses me for a very strange reason."

"Tell me," said Martin.

Barbara told him of the man who had come to her rescue at Newgate, and repeated all that Lord Rosmore had said of him.

"Do you think he can be such a man as that, Martin?"

"If Lord Rosmore knows him then--"

"If--but does he?"

"Lord Rosmore knows a great many scoundrels, I have been told. What was the name of this one?"

"He is not a scoundrel, Martin, I am sure, quite sure. A woman knows--how, I cannot tell, but she does. And then, even if he be a scoundrel, I would do him a service, if he can be found. That Monmouth is in England will be an excuse for taking him, even if he is innocent."

"Still you do not tell me his name."

"Gilbert Crosby," said Barbara.

Martin sat in a corner where the shadows fell, and Barbara did not notice his sudden start of interest.

"Crosby, Crosby," he said slowly. "There are Crosbys in Northamptonshire, and here in Hampshire, close by the borders of Wilts and Dorset, there is one; but a Gilbert Crosby--what is he like?"

"I cannot tell. He made me ashamed to be in such a place, and I did not look much into his face. He had grey eyes, and a voice that was stern but kind."

"An excellent picture!" cried Martin. "He should be as easy to find as a cat in winter time. Cats always go towards the fire, you know, and blink the dreamy hours away in the warmth of the blaze. Oh, we'll find this Gilbert Crosby, never fear; and when we find him, what shall we say? Our Lady of Aylingford is in love. Come with us."

"You are foolish, Martin."

"I was born so, they say, and therefore cannot help it, but, being a fool, I am convinced that folly is sometimes better than wisdom. To-night, like a fool, I will dream of this Gilbert Crosby, and learn in what direction he must be sought for; but now I must be wise and tell you that the hour grows late and that children should be in bed."

"I fear that childhood, and with it happiness, is being left far behind me, Martin," Barbara said with a sigh.

She could not see him clearly in the shadows, could not discern the strange light in his eyes, nor catch the hushed echo to her sigh which came from her crazy companion.

"No, no; we are all children right to the end," he said suddenly. "There are moments when we know it and feel it, and, alas! there are times, too, when we are blind and feel quite old. Open your eyes and you'll

know that childhood has you always by the hand, keeping love and purity and fair dreams blossoming in your heart. Come, I will take you along the terrace lest Mr. Fellowes or my Lord Rosmore or--Ah! how many more are there who would not give half their years and most of their fortune to stand in the shoes of this fool to-night."

"Peace, Martin."

"Do you hear her little fiddle?" and he laid his hand lovingly on the polished wood for a moment.

"You must not laugh while I am away. Maybe we'll have a laugh together when I return, for the moon is too bright to go out on to my roof and get wisdom from the stars. Come, mistress."

And they went down the narrow, winding stair together.

CHAPTER VII

KING MONMOUTH

The day was dying slowly, the west still aglow after the sinking of the sun. Thin wreaths of mist were rising from the wide, deep trenches, or "rhines," as the country folk called them, which intersected and drained this moorland, making cultivation possible where once had been a great marshy pool with shifting islands here and there, and rush-covered swamps.

Silence was over the land, broken now and again by the call of a bird, and presently by the quick beating of hoofs. A solitary horseman came rapidly along a road which skirted the edge of the moor. He was dusty with a long journey, and his horse came to a standstill at the first tightening of the rein. The rider had been in the saddle since early morning, and although he had not loitered on his journey, his eyes and ears had been keenly set all day, and, whenever practicable, he had chosen by-paths in preference to the main road. His was a mission which might bring him many dangers, and enemies even amongst those he sought to befriend.

Before him lay the moorland, growing mistier and a little unreal in the failing light. To his left, clustering roofs round a church tower, was a village, so silent that none but the dead might have been its inhabitants. Not a labourer plodded homewards from his toil in the fields; not a horse, freed from its harness, grazed in the fields. To his right, sharply cutting the distant sky-line, rose a tall spire, a landmark for miles round.

"The end of our journey," he murmured, patting the horse's neck, "and they won't thank us for coming."

The horse appeared to understand, and started forward again, shaking himself as though to throw off his weariness. His rider had smiled a little sadly as he spoke, but now his face was set again, as one who rides upon an unpleasant mission but is not to be turned aside from fulfilling it, no matter what the cost may be.

It was not long before he entered Bridgwater, and, had he not known that it was so, the aspect of the town would have shown him that he was in the midst of some great event. At no time would he be a man to pass unnoticed, but here his coming caused excitement. Words of welcome were flung at him, and anxious questions shouted after him. There was a feverish eagerness in the atmosphere, and if some faces which he saw at windows and in doorways had a look of fear in them, they were in the minority, and were not anxious to invite attention to themselves.

"Duke!" one man exclaimed in answer to the rider's question. "He is no duke who is at the castle, but a king--King Monmouth. Yesterday, in the market-place at Taunton, they proclaimed him."

"I had not heard," said the rider.

"Do you come alone?" asked the man.

"Quite alone."

"Each man counts--may count for much--but you should have ridden in at the head of a troop. We'd have cracked our throats with roaring a welcome."

The rider smiled, and passed on to the castle.

Here was the centre of bustle and excitement, constant coming and going, hastily given orders, and general clamour. In the castle field was encamped an army of six thousand men, a rabble truly, and poorly armed, many having naught but their tools for weapons, but enthusiasts all, certain of the righteousness of their cause, prepared to die for the King they had made and whom they trusted and loved. There was order of a sort, but it seemed strangely like confusion to the horseman as he dismounted within the courtyard. Here again a welcome met him, but it was with difficulty he could get a message carried to King Monmouth. Would he not see Lord Grey who was in charge of the cavalry, or Master Ferguson who could tell him all he wanted to know--or Buyse, or Wade, or--

"Monmouth, blockhead--and Monmouth only," was the angry retort. "And quickly, or you'll suffer for such laggard service."

He spoke with such authority that there was whispered speculation who this stranger might be. Perhaps he was the first of those nobles who had promised to draw swords with them in the great cause. A messenger went quickly, and soon returned. The King would see him at once.

As the stranger entered the chamber where half a dozen men were gathered, one man rose and came forward to meet him.

"Gilbert Crosby!" he exclaimed. "Never was friend more welcome."

His face, somewhat gloomy a moment before, was suddenly lit with a brilliant smile, so winning, so full of charming graciousness, that it was easy to understand the influence such a leader must have over the army of enthusiasts gathered in the town of Bridgwater. He was a handsome man, in appearance a born leader of men; and if Gilbert Crosby understood some of the shortcomings which lay underneath this attractive exterior, he could not remember them just now. There was the temptation

to offer himself heart and soul to this man and forget the self-imposed mission on which he had come. He had been brought in contact with Monmouth some years ago, had begun, perhaps, by pitying, and had ended by giving him a friendship which was truer and stauncher than any other he had ever possessed. When, a few years since, Monmouth had been feted throughout Somersetshire and Devon, Crosby had been much in his company, had entertained him modestly at his own manor, and had been at that sumptuous feast given in honour of the Duke by Thynne of Longleat.

"Gentlemen, this is a very dear friend of mine," said Monmouth, turning and presenting him to the company, "Mr. Gilbert Crosby of Lenfield Manor, than whom we could not welcome a better gentleman."

"Pardon, my lord, but--"

"Ye've come to help a great cause," said a long, lean man, bent in the shoulder, and with lantern jaws which mouthed out his words in the strongest of Scotch accents. "I'm Ferguson. Ye've heard of me; and I'm saying it's a fight against the enemies of the Lord ye've come to wage."

"I would not be misunderstood," said Crosby, turning to Monmouth; "I came to talk with you in private, not to fight."

"I regret to hear you say so," Monmouth answered. "I am rather weary of advice, but come with me." And then, having taken a few steps towards a door leading to another room, he stopped. "No, Crosby; friendship must stand aside for a while. I must have no secrets from these comrades, who are with me heart and soul in this enterprise."

"That's better--much better," said Ferguson. "Let us hear the man and his communication. It is no more than the right of those who are bearing the heat and burden of the day."

"I would urge that our conversation be in private," said Crosby.

"And I would urge otherwise," said Ferguson. "Such a desire for privacy has the savour of treachery about it."

"Can a man be a traitor to a cause he has never espoused?" Crosby asked quietly.

"Is it, then, that ye are afraid to speak before honest men?" Ferguson demanded roughly, the eruption with which his face was plentifully covered glowing a fiery red as he thrust his head forward like an angry vulture.

"Afraid!"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! I will have no quarrelling," said Monmouth. "I will go bail for my friend, even though he does not throw in his lot with us. I warrant he has naught but kindness in his heart for me, and that kindness has brought him to Bridgwater."

"The gentleman can certainly not be accused of cowardice if he comes to vilify your friends," said one man. "That requires courage."

"That is true, Grey," said Monmouth. "Speak freely, Crosby, as you would to me were we alone; or, if you regret coming, keep silent. You shall sup with us to-night, and to-morrow depart. We will force no man to

raise a hand for us."

"Why make promises until we have heard the man's communication?" growled Ferguson. "Those who are not for the Lord are for Baal; there is no middle course."

"The purpose for which I came shall be fulfilled," said Crosby. "You gentlemen know nothing of me, nor I of you, except that you stand by the side of your new-made king. For that I can honour you; on your side, pray give me credit for honesty."

"Words, words, like sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal," said Ferguson.

"Most assuredly such words, with their specious promises, have had much to do with this enterprise," Crosby retorted; and then, turning to Monmouth, he went on earnestly: "You have been deceived by lying agents, such men as Wildman and Danvers. By this time you must know that London will not raise a finger nor spend a guinea to help you, and that there is not a single Whig nobleman who will draw a sword on your behalf."

"You are full of news, sir," sneered Ferguson. "You must be deep in the councils of our enemies to know so much. And why limit yourself to Wildman and Danvers when you speak of liars and deceivers? I am Ferguson--everybody knows me. This is Lord Grey of Wark. Here stands Fletcher, and Wade and Anthony Buyse. Why not complete your accusation?"

"You are deceived with your master, rather than deceivers," Crosby answered. "You are prepared to fight for the cause, therefore you stand apart. You know that what I say is true, my lord." And he turned to Monmouth again.

"Finish what you have to say, Crosby."

"Your enterprise is doomed to failure. Here in Somersetshire you are loved, and a few thousand men, confident that the whole country will acclaim you, are prepared to lay down their lives for you. The country is not going to open its arms to you. You can no longer be deceived upon that point. The train-bands of Wiltshire are mustering, the militia of Sussex and Oxfordshire are on the road. The Duke of Beaufort supports the crown, and the undergraduates of Oxford take up arms to oppose you. Feversham and Churchill march with the regular troops against you, and your army of yokels must go down like a field of corn before the reapers."

"I take it that, had there been no doubt of our success, we should have had the pleasure of your company," said Ferguson.

"No, you would not. I do not favour the rebellion you are raising, and I come on a self-imposed embassy to plead with my Lord Monmouth, first because of my friendship for him, secondly to urge that he will not fashion a scourge for the back of this simple West-Country folk."

Monmouth's face had grown gloomy. He was too good a soldier not to know that what Crosby said was true, that his chance of success was of the feeblest kind. Not a single man of real importance had joined him; already there was regret that he had left his retreat in Brabant to lead such a desperate venture, and deep down in his heart, perhaps, he recognised in Ferguson his evil genius.

"You are a veritable Job's comforter," he said with a forced smile. "You show us a crowd of difficulties, have you any advice how they may be overcome?"

"Bid these men with their scythes and reaping-hooks disperse, and then leave England as quietly as you came."

Such a solution had entered into Monmouth's mind already. It seemed more feasible now that a friend had spoken it.

"You cannot!" exclaimed Lord Grey. "That would be base ingratitude to the men who are encamped without these walls. We have called them to arms, we must stand or fall with them."

"I grant it sounds the more honest advice," said Crosby, "but, my lord, you have to choose between two evils; I only counsel you to take the lesser. A few will suffer, doubtless, if you abandon your enterprise, but if you press on with it the whole of the West Country will be persecuted. King James does not know how to forgive."

"It is too late to turn back," said Monmouth. "Grey is right. These men look to me to lead them to victory. I will make the attempt. I have sworn it on the Holy Book."

Crosby bowed his head and was silent. He could not deny that Monmouth's attitude was that of an honest man.

"And what becomes of this gentleman who is so ready to help our enemies by giving us advice?" asked Ferguson.

"To-night he sups with us, to-morrow he departs," Monmouth answered.

"Is that wise? He has seen us in our stronghold, he has counted our numbers, he has knowledge of our weakness. He would be safer shut in this castle, safer still were he turned loose to the mercies of those men who are encamped yonder. I would make short work of all spies."

"The gentleman is honest, but gives bad advice," said Grey.

"I'm thinking we shall find him in the ranks of our enemies on the day of battle," Ferguson retorted.

"Even so, he departs in peace to-morrow," said Monmouth.

"I fight neither for you nor against you," Crosby answered. "Presently I may try to do something to help these peasants in their need, which will surely come. If in your hour of need, my Lord Monmouth, you should think there is safety at Lenfield Manor, I will do my best to find you a hiding-place there."

"If I enter Lenfield Manor I trust it will not be as a fugitive from my enemies," said Monmouth. "Now, gentlemen, to supper."

Gilbert Crosby had hardly expected anything else but failure, yet he was disappointed. Had he seen Monmouth privately he might have been able to persuade him better. Some honesty there might be in Monmouth's use of the Protestant faith to further his cause, but it was probably of very secondary consideration, while with those about him, and who were

responsible for his actions, it was merely a tool to be used so long as it proved useful. With the peasantry who had flocked to the blue standard it was everything, and it was chiefly on their account that Crosby had journeyed to Bridgwater. He would have saved Monmouth if he could, but after all, Monmouth aspired to a throne and must take the risks; the people, on the other hand, had nothing to win and everything to lose, and, although Crosby would not take up arms with them, he was quite ready to sacrifice himself on their behalf. He was of that stock which had bred the Pymms and Hampdens of the Civil War. At the Restoration his father had retired to his Manor of Lenfield and had mixed no more in politics. Possibly the Restoration was for the general good of the country rather than the rule of that rabid section of the Puritans which had caricatured the original spirit in which an appeal to arms had been made, but Thomas Crosby remained a Puritan, and distrusted the Stuarts as much as he had ever done. In this atmosphere Gilbert Crosby had grown to manhood, and since his father's death five years ago had been master of Lenfield. If he were less of a Puritan than his father, he was just as opposed to all forms of popery, and had been quite sensible of the danger which must arise on the accession of James. He had been active amongst those who were firmly determined to struggle against the re-establishment of Roman Catholicism in England, but he had lent himself to no underhand plots against the King, and, although conscious that there existed an undercurrent of intrigue in favour of the Duke of Monmouth, neither he nor those with whom he was associated had expected Monmouth's landing. It was natural, perhaps, that men like Wildman and Danvers should believe that such an invasion would force the hands of all those who clung to the Protestant faith, but the body to which Crosby belonged looked to the Prince of Orange as leader should open rebellion become necessary; they might be at one with the West-Country peasantry in religion, but they were not likely to help the son of Lucy Walters to his father's throne. Gilbert Crosby was prepared to be his friend, but he was not prepared to be his subject.

He had retired to his room and locked the door. He was to start early in the morning, and had taken leave of Monmouth, who had striven to appear in high spirits during supper. His forced gaiety had not deceived Crosby, whose heart was heavy as he paced the room thoughtfully for a time. Disaster was in the air, and Monmouth was but the shuttlecock of unscrupulous men.

"I wish I could help him," he sighed, and then he drew from his neck a white ribbon. The ends were knotted together so that he could suspend it round his neck under his clothing, and it had rested there day and night ever since he had picked it up. He folded it in his hands and kissed it; so he had done every night, and there had come to him a vision--a hurrying crowd of men and women, careless of everything but pleasure and excitement, and a young girl shrinking back against the wall, strangely out of place there, and alone.

"I wonder whether we shall ever meet again, and, if we do, whether I shall have the courage to show you the ribbon you dropped," he murmured.

He had slipped the ribbon round his neck again when there was a hasty knock at the door, and when he opened it Lord Grey entered the room quietly.

"I am glad to see you have not retired, Mr. Crosby. King Monmouth is afraid for you. Ferguson, a good man but a fanatic, is set upon detaining you at Bridgwater--has, perhaps, more sinister designs. He

plots on his own account in this matter to take you in the morning, so you must needs leave to-night."

"I would rather stay and settle the score with Ferguson," said Crosby.

"One man, while Ferguson has a dozen enthusiasts at his back! It is impossible. Besides, Monmouth commands, and, in Bridgwater at least, his word is law."

"I will go," Crosby answered.

Grey led the way down numerous small passages and short flights of narrow steps until a small door was reached.

"Your horse is here, but I will walk with you through the town. We can understand men coming in, we do not understand men going out."

"I have already said I should prefer to stay and face Ferguson in the morning," Crosby returned.

Grey laughed.

"His rage will be wonderful to behold, but you must not be there to see it. He will fling texts of damnation after you, which, had they power to kill, would certainly prevent you reaching the end of your journey. His knowledge of such passages in the Bible is wonderful."

They passed through the town quietly. It was sleeping.

"Farewell, Mr. Crosby. I wish you could have remained with us."

"And I wish that you had never been persuaded to try so mad a venture," said Crosby.

"The issue lies still in the balance," Grey returned.

So Gilbert Crosby rode away from Bridgwater, and the mist was thick over Sedgemoor.

CHAPTER VIII

SEDGEMOOR AND AFTERWARDS

Lentfield Manor, on the borders of Dorsetshire, was a square house set against a background of woods, with an expanse of park land in front of it. There was no particular beauty about it; indeed, it had a dreary look, and evidences of economy were not wanting. Thomas Crosby, never at any time to be reckoned a wealthy man, had expended much in the cause of the Parliament, and had left his son Gilbert a comparatively poor man. Within, the house was spacious and comfortable, with many a hiding-place in it which had been turned to account before now, and, if the furniture had grown shabby and showed its age unmistakably, Gilbert had become so accustomed to it that he hardly noticed its deficiencies. Lenfield was the home he loved, and this fact touched it, and everything in it and about it, with magical colours. Lately he had had visions of a fair

woman descending the low, broad stairs, smiling at him as she came; in fancy he had seen her flitting from room to room, filling them with laughter and sunshine. So much power had a length of white ribbon which had once belonged to such a woman.

Crosby returned to Lenfield by many by-roads, more careful, even, than he had been when riding towards Bridgwater. Once he had turned aside to avoid a band of militiamen, for he had no desire to be questioned. This insurrection in the West would bring suspicion on many an innocent person, and Thomas Crosby had been so well known a Puritan that it would be well for his son to be found at home when he was inquired for. If King James persisted in his struggle for popery, there was a much greater rebellion than Monmouth's to come, infinitely more far-reaching. In that outburst Gilbert Crosby intended to play his part, but until then he would safeguard himself as much as possible. There would be refugees from Monmouth's ragged army presently, he must help them if he could, but he would play no part in active rebellion.

An old man, who had been servant to the Crosbys when Gilbert was born, met him in the hall.

"I've been anxious, Master Gilbert," he said, "very anxious indeed, and the Lord be praised that you've returned in safety. I began to fear you might have ridden West to join Monmouth."

"Why should you think that, Golding?"

"When one is anxious one thinks of all the worst things that could possibly happen."

"It seems that they fight in a good cause, Golding."

"Don't let a soul hear you say so, Master Gilbert. They've arrested two hundred or more in London already, honest merchants many of them, and they say the gaol at Oxford is full of prisoners. No Puritan is really safe in these days."

"You've heard far more than I have, Golding. Who has brought you such news?"

"A gentleman who came to see you yesterday," the man answered. "He called me a round-headed old scoundrel, but I think there was no malice in it."

"Who was he?"

"He gave no name, but he wrote you a letter. I told him you were in London, and that I was hourly expecting your return."

"I did not say I had ridden to London," said Crosby.

"No, Master Gilbert, but he asked me where you were, and I thought it best to be definite."

"Where is this mysterious stranger's letter?"

Gilbert Crosby looked at the writing on the outside, which told him nothing. The contents mystified him, and he had no knowledge of the man who signed it.

"Sir," he read, "I have waited for you, having broken my journey to the West against these rebels on purpose to see you. This I have done, at some hazard to myself, at the bidding of one who honours me with commands. Since I cannot see you I must needs write, a dangerous proceeding, but your servant seems honest. Know then, sir, that you have enemies, men who will seek to find occasion to accuse you of disloyalty, and they may well find an easy opportunity now that Monmouth has landed. You are likely to be accused of helping his venture, and will know how best to secure yourself against such an accusation. For myself I know nothing of your aims, but the person who commands me believes you incapable of a base action, and would do you a service. This manor of yours is too near the West to be a safe place for you with an enemy so bent on your overthrow, and I am commanded to suggest that, for the present, you go to London and give no occasion for suspicion. The trust I have in my employer in this matter compels me to urge you to take heed of this letter, and moreover to offer you my help if at any time I can be of service to you.--Yours most obediently, Sydney Fellowes."

"The danger I can understand," Crosby murmured, having read the letter a second time; "the meaning of this gentleman's warning is beyond my comprehension. I have no knowledge of him, and who can the person be who commands him?"

"May I inquire if the communication is serious, Master Gilbert?" Golding asked presently.

"No, no, a kindly message from a man who would do me a service," Crosby answered. "If I am inquired for, Golding, at any time, or by anyone, show no hesitation, but bring them to me at once; we have nothing to hide at Lenfield," and then, when the old man had gone, he added, "at present, at any rate."

During the following days Crosby did not move abroad, did not leave the grounds of the manor except to walk into the village and gather any news he might. It was meagre enough, and was always to the effect that Monmouth was hard pressed. It was sadly told, too, for in the village the sympathy was with the Duke.

Doubtless through the length and breadth of the land there was sympathy, but it had little power to help. It did not bring arms to the rebel camp; it did not bring the men Monmouth had expected to fly to his standard. He knew, no one better, that with such an army as he possessed there could be no real success. His one hope was that, by holding out and perchance by driving back the enemy in some skirmish which might get magnified into an important engagement, the men he so longed for--the great body of the Whigs--would be persuaded to flock to him. He did not let go this hope even after Crosby's visit to Bridgwater. The one thing he could not afford was to be inactive, so he marched to Glastonbury, then to Wells, then to Shepton Mallet, harassed the whole way by a handful of troops under Churchill, drenched by continuous and heavy rain. Then he turned to seize Bristol, but, checked at Keynsham, he turned towards Wiltshire. Bath shut its gates against him, and at Philip Norton Feversham was close upon his heels. For one wild moment he contemplated an advance on London, but fell back on Wells, and from there returned to Bridgwater. Ten days of constant marching had wearied an army ill-prepared for such toil, and nothing had been accomplished.

This was the news that filtered through to Lenfield, and Crosby waited

for the great disaster which he knew must come.

Feversham, with the King's forces, lay encamped on Sedgemoor, and with him were some of the very men who had fought with Monmouth at Bothwell Bridge. As Monmouth surveyed the position of the enemy from the top of Bridgwater Church there leapt into his heart a wild hope that these men might desert and fight by his side in the day of battle. A desperate courage came to him. Feversham was not a general to inspire trust in his men; it was said that the camp was full of drunkenness. With drunken soldiers to command even Churchill might find ill-armed but enthusiastic peasants too much for him. The time to strike had come. Heaven itself lent aid to the rebels, for the night brought a thick fog over Sedgemoor as Monmouth left Bridgwater for the last time. Not a drum beat to the attack, not a shot was fired; only the word "Soho" was whispered that men might recognise their friends in the darkness.

Two of the broad trenches which intersected the moor, and where the fog was thickest, were crossed in silence, but there was a third, protecting the camp, of which Monmouth knew nothing. The check brought confusion, and some man in his excitement fired a pistol. The battle had begun, and although the camp was taken by surprise, and drink made many heavy sleepers, the drums beat quickly to arms and the peasant warriors had little advantage. Grey's motley cavalry was scattered in a moment, and Lord Rosmore, who was amongst those who charged upon them, laughed aloud. This was a rabble, not an army.

But while darkness lasted the peasants did not lose heart. Monmouth was in the midst of them, fighting with them, pike in hand. He might know that the battle was lost, might long for some friendly enemy to deal him his death blow. His enterprise would fail, but his end would be glorious. Men fell on every side of him, while he remained untouched, and ever the light grew stronger in the east. The light meant defeat; Monmouth knew it. Death would not come to him, and life suddenly seemed precious. They still fought, these soldiers of his; the scythes were red with blood; the Mendip miners still faced the enemy, and were cut down as they stood; and Monmouth in his flight turned for a moment to look back, and shuddered. His courage was gone. Fear took hold of him, and, hiding the blue riband and his George, he galloped away with Grey and Buyse, first towards the Bristol Channel, and then, turning, made towards Hampshire. He remembered that Gilbert Crosby had promised to find him a hiding-place, and if he could reach Lenfield he might be safe. The pursuers followed hard after him, Lord Rosmore amongst them, and he, too, thought of Lenfield Manor and Gilbert Crosby.

No news reached the village on the Sunday or the Monday. Crosby waited anxiously. The last he had heard was that Feversham was on Sedgemoor and that a battle was imminent. He walked through the woods to the high road, and if he saw a peasant whose face was unfamiliar, waited for him lest he should prove a fugitive and bring news. On Tuesday Lenfield knew that Sedgemoor had been fought and lost, and that Monmouth was a fugitive. In which direction he had fled was not known, but Crosby hazarded a guess and rode some distance towards Cranbourne Chase.

"Be careful, Master Gilbert," Golding whispered. "They've arrested men on less suspicion than you're giving occasion for."

Crosby was quite aware of this, but he had made a promise. He had not been prepared to fight for a rebellious Monmouth, but he was prepared to risk much now that he was defeated and a fugitive. Still, he went

Carefully, not seeking danger, and soon had reason to be convinced that Monmouth had fled in the direction of Lenfield. Men of the Somerset Militia were beating the country, and Crosby barely escaped falling in with them.

When he returned to the Manor at nightfall Golding was full of news. Lord Grey of Wark had been taken that morning, but Monmouth was still at large.

"But he is surrounded, Master Gilbert; there is no escape for him."

"No one has been to the Manor?" Crosby asked.

"No; but there have been scouts in the neighbourhood all day. Luke the blacksmith saw them and told me. They don't expect Monmouth to come to Lenfield, do they, Master Gilbert?"

"It seems certain that he has come in this direction, Golding."

"Then stay you at home, Master Gilbert," pleaded the old man.

"Nonsense. The presence of a few militia-men in the neighbourhood is no cause for fear. Tell them to let me have my horse at dawn."

Crosby did not sleep that night. Monmouth might come under cover of the darkness, and he waited and listened through the long hours. At break of day he was in the saddle again, but did not ride far afield. He hardly left his own land, and it was evident that Lenfield was surrounded. In the afternoon he returned home, unconscious that Monmouth had been taken during the morning, found in a ditch clad in a shepherd's dress, and was already on his way to Ringwood.

"Monmouth is taken," whispered Golding as Crosby dismounted.

"How do you know that? Who told you?"

"A man who came two hours ago. He is waiting."

"Is he a friend, do you think, Golding?"

"I do not know," Golding answered. "He said he would wait until you came, and then demanded to be taken to the stables, where he tended his own horse. A masterful man, Master Gilbert, but whether a friend or an enemy who can tell?"

"We will soon see," said Crosby; and as he turned to go to this stranger Golding laid a hand on his arm.

"If there is danger, Master Gilbert, call. I have lost some strength with the passing of years, but I have never lost my ability to shoot straight," and he just showed him the butt of a pistol in the pocket of his coat.

Crosby patted him on the shoulder and went to his persistent and uninvited guest, wondering whether Monmouth were really taken, whether this might not be he.

Men still surrounded Lenfield. It was whispered amongst them that, although Monmouth was a prisoner, there was another important traitor

yet to capture. They had been told so by Lord Rosmore, under whose command they were. Now they were ordered to draw in closer, and to take anyone who attempted to escape.

"Capture him if possible, but, if not, shoot him down," was Rosmore's command. Then, with a dozen men, he rode across the stretch of park land to the front entrance of the Manor. He made no attempt to surround it in such a manner that those within might take alarm. His men were in the woods, escape was impossible.

There was some little delay in answering his summons, and then a servant came to the door.

"Is your master, Mr. Gilbert Crosby, within?"

"I think he is asleep, sir; but will you be pleased to enter?"

The girl looked innocent enough, but Lord Rosmore was too well versed in artifice not to be cautious.

"My horse is restive, as you see. Will you request your master to come out and speak with me for a moment?"

The girl curtsied and departed with her message, leaving the door open.

"He suspects nothing," Rosmore whispered to a man beside him.

"I am not so certain," was the answer, "since the door is left so invitingly open. It would be natural to enter, and an ambush might await us within. That girl was over simple to be natural, it seemed to me."

"Keep watch upon the windows above, some of you," said Rosmore in a low tone. "If this is a well-baited trap we are not such fools as to walk into it."

The girl reappeared and came across the hall.

"I cannot find my master," she said. "He will be in the gardens somewhere. Will you not come in and wait?"

For a moment Rosmore hesitated, and then dismounted. He called to two or three men to come with him.

"If you see him coming tell him we are within," he said to the others. "Now, my girl, we will see if we can find your master," and he caught her roughly by the arm. "Where is he hiding, eh?"

"Hiding?"

"Yes, pretty innocence; and unless you tell me quickly I shall have to bare these shoulders of yours and see what the taste of a whip can accomplish."

At that moment there was a shout from the men without, and Rosmore rushed back to them. A horseman had suddenly ridden from the stables at the far end of the house.

"Where's that scoundrel Rosmore?" he cried. "He would take Crosby of Lenfield, would he? Well, now is his chance; and in taking him he will

capture an even more notorious person, whom, rumour says, he has long desired to meet."

"Now I know!" Rosmore exclaimed as he flung himself into the saddle. "After him, and shout, all of you, to put the men in the woods on the alert."

The horseman turned and galloped across the park in a slanting direction.

"Don't ride too close, Rosmore," he shouted over his shoulder, "for I seldom miss the mark I aim at."

He suddenly altered his course. It was deftly done, and served to gain him a few yards on his pursuers.

"To the right and left to cut him off!" cried Rosmore. "We have him. The chase is over before it has well begun."

Well might he say so, for the fugitive was galloping straight towards a stiff fence that few horses would face and few horsemen would hazard their necks over.

He turned again and laughed, but rode straight on. The next moment, with inches to spare, the gallant animal had cleared the fence and dropped into the wood beyond.

A cry of wonder came from the men who were following him, a curse from Lord Rosmore, for the rider was the highwayman Galloping Hermit, and wore the brown mask.

CHAPTER IX

"THE JOLLY FARMERS"

For a few moments the very daring of the leap paralysed the hunters. The man had surely gone to his death, preferring an end of this sort to the one that most surely awaited him if he were captured. They had looked to see horse and rider crash downwards to destruction, or perchance fall backwards to be crushed and maimed past all healing; but when neither of these things happened a cry of astonishment, not unmingled with admiration, burst from a dozen throats. The shouting had brought men running from the other sides of the house; a few of them were in time to see the leap accomplished and to realise that Galloping Hermit had been in their midst; others saw only a straggling group of horsemen at fault, and looked in vain for the reason of the shouting. Lord Rosmore himself was too surprised to give orders as quickly as he might have done, and made up for the delay by swearing roundly at everybody about him.

"Fools! What are you waiting for?" he cried savagely. "There are more ways into the wood than over that cursed fence."

He turned to one man and gave him quick instructions concerning the watch to be kept on the Manor House, and then spurred his horse into the wood after the mounted men who had already started in pursuit.

Either from actual knowledge, or conviction, the highwayman seemed to be certain that at this spot the woods surrounding Lenfield Manor would not be so carefully watched, that so stiff a fence would be deemed sufficient to make escape that way impossible. To the right and left of it, however, men were sure to be stationed; so, with a soothing word to his horse, he plunged into the depths of the wood along a narrow track, as one who knew his way perfectly and was acting on some preconceived plan. In a small clearing he halted, listening for the sounds of pursuit, and then pressed forward again until he presently came out upon the green sward bordering a road. Again he halted to listen, and, satisfied that the hunters were not too perilously close upon his heels, he cantered in the direction of the open country which lay to his right. He was now riding in a direction which made an angle with the way some of his pursuers had evidently taken; he knew the spot where the two ways met, and halted again when he reached it. Here a broad glade cut into the very heart of the wood, and down it came three horsemen at a trot, looking to right and left as they came, searching for their hidden quarry. Then they saw him at the end of the glade, and shouted as they put spurs into their horses. The shouts were answered from other parts of the wood, and the highwayman smiled underneath his mask as he patted his horse's neck.

"We'll give them a hopeful chase for a while, my beauty; presently you shall stretch yourself and leave them behind, but it's a steady canter for a time. No, no; not even so fast as that. We are well out of pistol shot."

Six men took up the chase, their faces set with grim determination. They were well mounted, and hopeful of success. They had every incentive to do their utmost.

"There is a large reward offered for the capture of the wearer of the brown mask," said Lord Rosmore. "He is, besides, Gilbert Crosby, a rebel, and, further, I have a private account to settle with him. I double the reward."

The men nodded. It would be strange if six of them could not compass the downfall of one. They rode on in silence, sometimes with increased hope as the distance between them and the highwayman lessened a little, sometimes with muttered curses when they realised that their horses were doing as much as they were able.

"I think he tires a little," said one man presently, and Lord Rosmore saw that they had materially gained upon their quarry.

"Where will this take us?" he asked.

"We should strike the West Road soon," was the answer. "He'll have a hiding-hole somewhere near it, maybe."

"He is too clever to lead us to it," said Rosmore. "He'll change his line presently, and we may have to separate. But his horse is tiring, that is certain. Press forward, lads; if we gain only inches it must tell in time."

The day was drawing to a close. Evening shadows were beginning to steal up from behind distant woods. There would be light for a long while yet, but the chase must end before the shadows grew too deep, or the

highwayman's chances would be many. The road took a wide circle through a plantation, and then ran straight across a stretch of common land, gradually mounting upwards to a distant ridge. As they galloped through the plantation the highwayman was lost sight of for a few moments round the bend in the road. The hunters pressed their horses forward at the top of their speed, conscious that in such a place the fugitive might quite possibly slip away from them; but when they came on to the straight road he was still in front of them, farther in front of them than he had been at any time during the chase. The highwayman turned to look back, and seemed to check his horse a little, but his advantage did not appear to decrease.

"What a magnificent beast he rides!" exclaimed Rosmore. "We shall have to separate, and without his knowing it. The opportunity will come directly. Look! I thought as much."

The highwayman had evidently only tried his horse's power. He was quite satisfied that he could distance his pursuers when he liked, and thought that the time had come. He was leaning forward in his saddle now, riding almost as a trick rider might do, but the effect was great. Possibly he contrived to shift his weight, for the horse suddenly bounded forward, breasting the hill to the ridge in splendid fashion. He might have been at the beginning of the race instead of nearing the end of it.

"Playing with us all the time!" said one man with a curse.

"That pace cannot last," Rosmore returned. "Keep after him. The moment he is over the ridge, you, Sayers and Watson, come with me. You others keep after him. He may be headed away from the road, which must lie just beyond the ridge. Perhaps we shall cut him off, for I have an idea he means to turn upon his track. Capture, or no capture, there's money for this day's work."

As the highwayman disappeared over the ridge Lord Rosmore and his two men turned at right angles from the road and went across the common; the others continued the pursuit, but going not a whit faster than they were before. No amount of spurring served to lengthen the stride of their horses. To follow seemed hopeless, was hopeless unless the unexpected happened.

"Let our horses walk for a few moments," said Rosmore. "You know this part of the country, Sayers; what should you say our direction is now?"

"I don't know it over-well, my lord, but I should say we've got Salisbury almost straight behind us and Winchester some miles in that direction," and the man pointed a little to the right. "I should say we've been riding pretty well due north from Lenfield."

"Then if the highwayman wanted to make Winchester he would have to cross us somewhere if we go straight forward?"

"He would, my lord, but since we've been after him he's given no sign of making for Winchester," Sayers answered.

"An inquiry in that direction may give us some information," said Rosmore. "I have an idea that the Brown Mask will be seen along the Winchester Road presently."

"These horses will be no match for his."

"They must carry us a little farther, but the pace may be easy," said Rosmore, shaking his jaded animal into a trot, and the two men rode side by side a few paces behind him. Strange to say, failure seemed to have improved Rosmore's temper rather than aggravated it. He had at least a score of witnesses to prove who Galloping Hermit was. A girl might be romantic enough to pity such a man, but it could hardly be that pity which is akin to love.

"She has the pride of her race in her," he murmured. "I would not have it otherwise. There are a dozen ways to a woman's heart, and if need be I will try them all."

The prospect appeared to please him, for he smiled. So for two hours they rode in the general direction of Winchester.

"This is foolery," whispered Sayers to his companion. "I warrant the Brown Mask has gone to earth long ago. His lordship has more knowledge of this way than he pretends, I shouldn't wonder, and knows of a nest with a pretty bird in it. There may be other birds about to look after her, Watson. Such kind of hunting is more to my taste than the sort we've been sweated with to-day."

They were presently traversing a road with a wood on one side and fields on the other, when a glimmer of light shone in front of them, and the barking of a dog, catching the sound of the approaching horsemen probably, awoke the evening echoes. Back against the trees nestled "The Jolly Farmers," an inn of good repute in this neighbourhood, both for the quality of its liquor and the amiable temper of its landlord. A guest had entered not five minutes ago, and was talking to the landlord in an inner parlour when the barking of the dog interrupted them.

"Horses!" said the landlord. "They follow you so sharply that it is well to be cautious. This way, sir."

He touched the wall where there certainly was no sign of a door, yet a door swung open inwards, disclosing a dark and narrow chamber. The guest entered it without question, and the landlord hurried out to meet the new arrivals.

"You ride late, gentlemen."

"And would sample your liquor, landlord," said Rosmore, dismounting and bidding his men do the same. "Have the horses looked to."

The landlord called in a stentorian voice, and a lad came running from the rear of the premises.

"Any other guests to-night, landlord?" Rosmore asked as he passed into the inn.

"No, sir, and not much chance of them. They're having a sort of feast in the village yonder--dancing and such-like; and what business there is 'The Blue Boar' will get--unless, mind you, a pair o' lovers is tempted to come up this way for the sake o' the walk."

"How far is the village?"

"Three-quarters of a mile by the road, half a mile by the path through

the wood. But, bless you, sir, if the lovers were to come they'd get their refreshment out o' kisses and not trouble my ale."

"What do you call this place?"

"The Jolly Farmers,' sir, and I'm called Tom Saunders, very much at your service."

"A poor spot for an inn, surely?" said Rosmore.

"There are better, and there are worse," was the answer. "We're in touch with the main road, and they are good enough to say that the entertainment is worth going a little out of the way for."

"No doubt. We will judge for ourselves."

"And, although I blush to mention it, folks have a kind of liking for Tom Saunders himself. It's often the landlord that makes the inn."

If the landlord blushed, it made no appreciable difference to his rosy countenance, which grinned good-humouredly as he executed Lord Rosmore's orders.

"Truly, it is good liquor," said Rosmore when he had sampled it. "Do you get good company to come out of their way to taste it?"

"Ay, sir, at times, and a few soldiers lately. You and your two men here will be from the West, very like. I've heard of Sedgemoor fight. May one know the latest news?"

"Who told you of Sedgemoor?"

"I think it was the smith down in the village, or it might 'a been Boyce, the carpenter; anyway, it was somebody down yonder. They'd heard it from someone on the road."

"Monmouth is taken," and Rosmore watched the landlord closely as he said it.

"That'll be good news for King James," was the answer. "Would it be treason to say I'm sorry for them who've been foolish enough to take up arms?"

"Too near it to be wise. Pity of that kind often leads a man to give help, and that's the worst kind of treason."

"So I've heard say, but I never could understand the rights and wrongs of the law, nor, for that matter, the lawyers neither. I'd a lawyer here not many weeks back, and all his learning hadn't taught him to know good ale when he put his lips to it. What's the good of learning if it can't teach you that?"

"Do you number him amongst your good company?" asked Rosmore.

"I don't, but he'd reckon himself that way."

"You'll be having other company before long asking you to find them hiding-places. The rebels are being hunted in every direction."

"We're too far away," said the landlord. "Bless you, we're a sight o' miles from Bridgwater, and most o' these fellows ain't got horses to carry them. They won't trouble 'The Jolly Farmers,' sir."

"And if they did?"

"The bolts on the door are strong enough to keep them out."

"The bolts, if used, are more likely to keep them out than the distance," said Rosmore; and, although the landlord still smiled, he was quite conscious of the doubt expressed concerning the use of the bolts. Rosmore paused for him to speak, but when he remained silent went on. "We are searching for a rebel now, one Gilbert Crosby. Do you reckon him amongst your good company?"

"I might if I had ever heard of him," the landlord answered.

"Who is in the house at this moment?" Rosmore asked.

"A wench in the kitchen, and myself. My daughter is in the village at the merry-making, and the only other person about the place to-night is the boy who is looking after your horses."

"I am sorry to inconvenience you, landlord, but I must make a search. If you're honest you will not mind the inconvenience."

"Mind!" the landlord exclaimed. "I like to see a man do his duty, whatever that duty may be, and whatever the man's station may be."

"Spoken honestly," said Rosmore. "Watson, you will stay here. Savers, come with me, and you come, too, landlord."

The search was a thorough one, and although Rosmore keenly watched the landlord he could discover no sign of fear either in his face or attitude. Watson had nothing to report when they returned to the tap-room.

"Tell me, landlord, what persons of quality have you in the near neighbourhood?"

Saunders mentioned several names, amongst them Sir Peter Faulkner.

"Are we near Sir Peter's? That is good hearing. He will give me a welcome and good cheer."

"You take the road through the village," said Saunders. "It's less than five miles to Sir Peter's."

"We'll get on our way, then," said Rosmore. Then he turned quickly upon the landlord. "Do you know Galloping Hermit, the highwayman?"

"Well, by name. A good many have had the misfortune of meeting him on the West Road yonder. And, to tell the truth, sir, I believe I've seen him once--and without the brown mask, too."

"When?" Rosmore asked sharply.

"It may be three, perhaps four, months back. A horseman galloped up to the door, just at dusk, and called for ale. He did not dismount, and I

took the drink to him myself. There was nothing very noticeable about him, only that his eyes were sharp and restless, and he held his head a little sideways as if he were listening. It was the horse that took my attention rather than the man. It was an animal, sir, you'd not meet the likes of in a week's journey. When the horse had galloped into the shadows of the night I said to myself, there goes the highwayman for a certainty."

"And you've never seen him since?"

"No, nor shall now, since he was hanged lately at Tyburn."

"That was a mistake, landlord. Galloping Hermit is still alive. I have seen him to-night."

"Alive!"

"Ay, and the horse you describe fits with the animal he was riding."

"I hope your honour was not robbed of much."

"Of nothing, my good friend," laughed Rosmore, "except of the satisfaction of laying him by the heels."

"Still alive, is he?" said the landlord. "I cannot credit it. Maybe 'tis someone else who wears the brown mask now, and trades on the other's fame."

"It is not likely, and if it is so he must suffer for the other's sins," said Rosmore; but the idea lingered with him as he rode away from the inn, followed by Watson and Sayers.

As they passed through the village the sound of dancing to the music of a fiddle came from a large barn by the roadside, and a brisk trade was being done at an ale-house over the way. Lord Rosmore had small sympathy with the common folk and their amusements; besides, he was thinking deeply of the landlord's suggestion. Fate seemed to have thrust certain cards into his hand to play--cards which seemed to belong to two separate games, and which, if he could only join them into one, might bring him victory. How was he to join them? Somewhere there was a card missing, a link which must be supplied. Did the landlord's suggestion supply it? As he rode slowly forward the sound of the dancing and laughter was gradually hushed; only the far-carrying notes of the fiddle lingered a little longer. Lord Rosmore fancied he heard the notes long after it was possible for him to do so. Even as Sir Peter welcomed him presently they seemed to be sounding faintly in his ears.

In the tap-room of "The Jolly Farmers" the landlord sat staring at the opposite wall for some time. He looked as if he were counting over and over again the glasses and tankards which hung or stood on shelves there, and could not get the number to his satisfaction. Once or twice he turned his head towards the door and listened, but appeared to catch no sound worthy of investigation. Once he got up and stepped lightly to the parlour beyond, and looked towards the secret door which he had opened for his guest, but he did not touch it. Satisfied that no sound came from that direction, he went back and stared at the glasses and tankards again. Presently he went to the inn door and looked out at the night. There was a soft breeze singing along the road, and a multitude of stars overhead. The breeze carried no other sound besides its own

music.

A good two hours passed after the departure of the horsemen before the landlord's usual energy returned. Then he went into the inner parlour and opened the secret door. A few moments elapsed before the guest stepped out. It seemed as if he were not quite certain of the landlord's honesty.

"Well, has he come?" he asked.

"No, but they have gone," the landlord answered. "Three horsemen who had ridden far looking for a rebel."

"I must thank you for hiding me so securely. For your courtesy I should tell you my name. I am--"

"Better let me stay in ignorance," said Saunders. "I am in no position to answer questions then."

"As you will; and, truly, I am on an adventure of which I understand little and was warned to speak of sparingly. I was to make for this inn and inquire for a fiddler. How this fiddler fellow is to serve me I do not know."

"Nor I," answered the landlord.

At that moment a little cadence of notes, strangely like a laugh, fell upon their ears, and there came a fiddler into the tap-room.

"Ale, Master Boniface, ale. I could get well drunk upon the generosity of your village yonder. See how they rewarded this fiddle of mine for making them dance." And he held out a handful of small coins. "Ale, then, and let it be to the brim. Has anyone inquired for a poor fellow like me?"

"This gentleman," said the landlord.

The fiddler looked steadily into the eyes of the guest for a moment, as if he were trying to recall his face, then he bowed.

"Martin Fairley, sir, is very much at your service."

CHAPTER X

FATE AND THE FIDDLER

The stars were still bright in the deep vault above, the breeze still had a note of singing in it, but the sound of music and dancing was hushed in the village, and all the lights were out, when two horsemen came through a gateway on to the road some five miles away.

Gilbert Crosby found himself in strange company. No sooner had this queer fiddler learned that search had been made at "The Jolly Farmers" than he refused to give any information, or listen to any explanation, until they had put some distance between themselves and the inn. He

hurried out of the house, and in a few minutes returned with the information that he had two horses waiting in the wood behind. Crosby's mount was a good enough looking animal which seemed capable of carrying him far if not fast; his companion's horse was so lean and miserable that it seemed to bear a resemblance to the fiddle which Fairley had slung by a string across his back. In spite of its ill-condition Crosby wondered whether it would not be too much for the musician, who mounted awkwardly and seemed so intent on keeping his seat that he was not able to talk. He had grown more accustomed to the animal by the time they came out on to the high road. They had travelled chiefly at walking pace, by rough paths, and through woods where the tracks would have been difficult to find even in the daytime, and impossible at night save to one who knew them intimately.

"So we strike the road as you declared we should," said Crosby. "You have great knowledge of the byways in this part of the country, Master Fairley."

"I have travelled them, usually on foot, for many years," he answered. "My fiddle and I go and make music in all the villages round about; almost everybody knows me along the road. Should we be questioned, say you fell in with me and we continued together for company."

"Trust me. I can keep a quiet tongue," Crosby returned. "Will you tell me now where we are going, and how it is you interest yourself in me?"

"Better that you should tell me your part of the story first or I may be giving you stale news."

"Truly, I have little to tell," Crosby said. "I am no rebel, though the charge might with some show of reason be brought against me. To-day--or yesterday rather, for it must be long after midnight--my house was secretly surrounded. My servant told me when I returned in the afternoon, and informed me also that a man was waiting to see me."

"Who was it?" Fairley asked.

"I must keep faith with him since so far he keeps faith with me. He bid me say nothing concerning him."

A short ejaculation came from the fiddler. Perhaps his horse gave him trouble at that moment, but it seemed to Crosby that his companion did not believe him.

"You doubt what I say?"

"Did I say so?" asked Fairley. "I am used to strange tales, and I have only heard a part of yours. Finish it, Mr. Crosby."

"The flight from Sedgemoor had let licence loose in the West, and I have reason to think that I am a victim of private vengeance. Be this as it may, my visitor had a scheme for my deliverance. He proposed facing the enemy who had now come to the door, arranged that I should give him a few minutes' start, and then make my way to the village from the back of the house. I should find a horse ready for me there, and he told me to ride to 'The Jolly Farmers,' where I was to await the coming of a fiddler who would direct me further. He was most insistent on the exact road I should follow, that I should leave my horse at a certain place in the village, and reach the inn on foot. My escape was cleverly

arranged."

"This man did you a service," said Fairley. "I wish I knew his name."

"I cannot tell you. I can tell you nothing further about him; but now that I have escaped I feel rather as if I were playing a coward's part by running away."

"Why? You are not a rebel."

"True; yet I count for something in my own neighbourhood and might stretch out a protecting arm."

"You were caught like a rat in a hole, and would have been powerless; whereas now you are free to fight your enemies, thanks to your strange visitor."

"You speak of him as if you doubted his existence," said Crosby with some irritation.

"Doubt! I do assure you I am one of those strange fellows who see and hear things which most folk affirm have no existence. I find doubting a difficult matter. With ill-luck I might get burnt for a wizard. I promise you there is more understanding in me than you would give me credit for, and certainly I should not call such a flight as yours cowardly."

"I shall be able to judge the better perhaps when I have heard your part of the tale," said Crosby.

"That is by no means certain, for my part is as vague as yours," Fairley answered. "You were in danger, that I knew, but the exact form of it I was ignorant of. I was instructed to find you and bring you to a place of safety, and was told that I should meet with you at 'The Jolly Farmers.'"

"By this same man, I suppose?"

"No. My instructions came from a woman."

"A woman!"

"Yes, and one who is evidently interested in your affairs," Fairley answered. "Does your memory not serve to remind you of such a woman?"

Crosby did not answer the question. In the darkness of the road before him he seemed to see a vision.

"What is this woman like?" He did not turn to look at his companion as he asked the question; he hardly seemed to know that he had spoken.

"I cannot tell you; there are no words," said Fairley, in that curious monotone which the recital of verse may give, or which constant singing may leave in a minstrel's ordinary speech. "I cannot tell, but my fiddle might play her to you in a rhapsody that should set the music in your soul vibrating. There are women whose cunning fingers may catch with brush and pigment and limn it on canvas; there are women whose image may be traced in burning words so that a vision of her rises before the reader or the hearer; and there are women whose beauty can

only be told in music--the subtle music that lies in vibrating strings, music into which a man can pour his whole soul and so make the world understand. Such a woman is she who bid me find Gilbert Crosby and bring him into safety."

"I know no such woman," Crosby answered. "It may seem strange to you, Master Fairley, but women have not entered much into my world. Tell me this woman's name."

"Nay, I had no instructions to do so."

"Shall I see her at the end of this journey?"

"She hath caprices like all women; how can I tell?"

"At least tell me whither we go."

"If you can read the stars you may know our direction," was the answer. "Yonder is the Wain and the North Star, and low down eastwards is the first light of a new day. We may mend our pace a little if only this poor beast of mine has it in him to do so."

It was no great pace they travelled even when they endeavoured to hasten. The fiddler's lean nag, either from ill-condition or over-work, or perchance both, could do little more than amble along, falling back into a walking pace at every opportunity. Perhaps it was as well, Crosby thought, for the fiddler seemed strangely uneasy in the saddle, and more than once apologised for his want of dexterity when he noticed his companion glance at him.

"He's a sorry beast to my way of thinking, but to his thinking maybe I'm a sorry rider. Those who have great souls to carry often have poor knees for the gripping of a saddle."

Crosby did not answer. The vision was still before him on the road, and he wondered whether Fate and this fiddler were leading him to his desire. Absorbed in his dream, he let his horse, which had no speed to boast of, suit his pace to that of the lean nag, and did not trouble to think how quickly they must be overtaken should there be any pursuit on the road behind them. So they rode forwards, their faces towards the growing dawn, and Gilbert Crosby was conscious of a new hope stirring in his soul, of an indefinable conviction that to-night was a pilgrimage, a journeying out of the past into the future.

"He rides well surely who rides towards the coming day," said Fairley suddenly, breaking a long silence. Crosby felt that it was true, and that his own thoughts had found expression.

* * * * *

The night brought no vision to Barbara Lanison, only a restless turning to and fro upon her bed and a wild chaos of mingled doubts and fears which defied all her efforts to bring them into order. There were still many guests at the Abbey, but she saw little of them except at a distance. She had begged her uncle to excuse her presence, and he had merely bowed to her wishes without commenting upon them. He may have been angry with her, but since she had heard him laughing and jesting with his companions as they passed through the hall, or went along the terrace, she concluded that her absence did not greatly trouble him.

There were guests at the Abbey now who hardly knew her, some who did not know her at all, and she was missed so little by Mrs. Dearmer and her friends that they no longer troubled to laugh at her. She was as she had been before her visit to London, only that now she understood more; she was no longer a child. She had not seen Sydney Fellowes again before his departure, but she had no anger in her heart against him. He had insulted her, but it was done under the influence of wine, and in reality he was perchance more genuinely her friend than any other guest who frequented the Abbey. Had he not said that this was no home for her? Lord Rosmore she had seen for a few moments before he had set out to join the militia marching westward. He was courtly in his manner when he bid her farewell, declared that she would know presently that he had only interfered to save her from a scoundrel, and he left her with the assurance that he was always at her command. Barbara hardly knew whether he were her friend or foe. Sir Philip Branksome had left Aylingford full of the doughty deeds which were to be done by him, but it was whispered that he was still in London, talking loudly in coffee-house and tavern. Judge Marriott had hurried back to town, thirsting to take a part in punishing these rebels, but before he went he had made opportunity to whisper to Barbara: "Should there be a rebel who has a claim on your sympathy, Mistress Lanison, though he be as black as the devil's dam, yet he shall go free if you come and look at me to plead for him. Gad! for the sake of your pretty eyes, I would not injure him though the King himself stood at my elbow to insist." Barbara could do no less than thank him, and felt that he was capable of perjuring himself to any extent to realise his own ends, and wondered if there were any circumstances which could bring her to plead for mercy to Judge Marriott.

Mad Martin had gone, too, with his fiddle under his arm. "Folks will marry for all there is fighting in the West," he had said, "and my fiddle and I must be there to play for them." He had said no more about Gilbert Crosby, had probably forgotten by this time that she had ever mentioned the name with interest. Half dreamer, half madman, what could he do? With a fiddle-bow for his only weapon he was a poor ally, and yet he seemed to be the only true friend she possessed.

Barbara was very lonely, and more and more she was persuaded that Aylingford Abbey was a different place from that which, through all her childhood until now, she had considered it. Something evil hung like a veil over its beauty, an evil that must surely touch her if she remained there. She was impelled to run away from it, yet whither could she go? Could she explain the evil? Could she put into words what she was afraid of? The world would laugh at her, even as Mrs. Dearmer did, or label her a wench of Puritan stock, as her aunt, Lady Bolsover, was inclined to do. She must talk to Martin, who had taught her so many things; but even Martin was away fiddling at some festival that rustics might dance. Barbara was disposed to resent his absence at a time when she wanted him so much.

Yesterday she had heard some guests talking of the fight on Sedgemoor as they walked to and fro on the terrace below the window. Monmouth was defeated and flying for his life, and the heavy hand of King James would certainly fall swiftly on the country folk of the West. Would it fall upon the man who had come to her rescue at Newgate? Certainly it would be stretched out against him were he such a man as Lord Rosmore declared him to be.

Wearied out with much thinking, Barbara fell asleep towards morning, and

the sun was high, flooding the terrace with light and warmth, when she awoke.

Later, she went across the ruins to the door in the tower. Martin might have returned in the night. The door was still locked. It was always locked when Martin was away from the Abbey, and he took the key with him.

She went back slowly along the terrace, and, from sheer loneliness, she was tempted to forsake her solitude and join the guests. There was a group of them now at the end of the terrace, and Barbara's step had quickened in that direction when she heard Mrs. Dearmer laugh. She shuddered, and went no farther. Utter loneliness was far preferable to that woman's company.

The day seemed to drag more heavily than any which had preceded it. Surely there had never been such long hours and so many hours in a day before! The sunshine was out of keeping with her mood, and it was almost a relief to her when the afternoon became overcast and the haze on the distant hills spoke of rain. The sound of rain was on the terrace presently, the stone flags grew dark with the wet, and the woods became sombre and deeply mysterious. A light still lingered in the west, low down and angry looking, but the night fell early over the Abbey. Candles had been burning in Barbara's room for a long time when a faint cadence of notes struck upon her ear. She knew it well, and the sound gladdened her so that she laughed as she threw open the window. Her laughter was like a musical echo of the notes.

"Martin!" she said, leaning from the casement and looking down on the terrace; "Martin!"

There was no answer. She looked to right and left, but only the shadows of the night lay still and unmoving. Had the sound been fancy? She closed the casement and shivered a little as though she had heard a ghost; then there came a knock at her door.

She opened it quickly and stood back.

"It is you, then?"

"Did you not hear my fiddle smile? No, it was not a laugh to-night; I was afraid someone else might hear it. Will you come to the tower? I like to sit in my own room when I come back from making the folks laugh and dance and helping them to be happy."

"Well, Martin, have you nothing to tell me?"

Now that he had come back, advice was not what she asked for, but news.

"We always have much to talk of--always--you and I."

"But to-night, Martin, especially to-night. Ah! you have forgotten."

"Very likely," he answered. "I do forget a great many things. But come to my room in the tower; I may remember when I get there."

"No, Martin, not to-night," she said.

"I may remember," he repeated; "and, besides, why should you be less

kind to me? I always look forward to my own room and you."

There was a tone of sadness in his voice, and she was angry with herself for occasioning it. Because she was sad, was that a reason why she should make this poor fellow miserable? Would he not do anything to serve her which fell within the power of the poor wits God had given him?

"I will come," she said.

"You must wrap a thick cloak about you," said Martin. "It is raining heavily."

She left him for a moment and quickly returned, closely wrapped up.

"Tread lightly," said Martin. "I always like to think that these evenings when you come to my tower are secret meetings, that the world must not know of them. I pretend sometimes that we are followed, and must go warily."

"Foolish Martin!"

They reached the terrace by a small door, and went quickly through the ruins to the tower. The door was still locked. Martin had evidently only just returned to the Abbey, and had not yet entered his tower.

"Give me your hand up the stairs," he said.

"Why, Martin, I must know every turn in them as well as you do," she answered.

"It is my fancy to-night," he said. "Give me your hand. So. I have a dream of a valiant knight, famous in war and tourney, one whom fine ladies turn to glance after and desire that he should wear their favour. Only one fair maid heeds him not, and ever the knight's eyes look towards her. Whenever he draws his sword, or sets his lance in rest, he whispers her name; for him she is the one woman in all the world. And suddenly there comes to her the knowledge of his worth; I know not how it comes, but she understands, and then--The dream ends then, yet to-night it seems to linger for an instant. This dark stair leads to some beautiful palace. You are the woman of the dream, the most beautiful woman in the world; and for just a moment I stand a valiant knight--your knight--and welcome you to all I possess."

His voice was little above a whisper. She could not see his face, but in the dark her hand was raised and lips touched it.

"Martin!"

"After all, it's a narrow winding stair, and leads to a meagre chamber where lives a poor fellow who loves his fiddle. Come."

The room was in darkness, but Martin guided her to a chair.

"Wait; we will have candles, four of them to-night, and we will pretend we keep high festival. See, mistress, how bright the room is; there are scarcely any dark shadows in it at all."

She turned to look, and then a little cry came from her parted lips.

Before her, his eyes fixed upon her, stood the man who had come to her rescue at Newgate.

"You see, mistress, I did not forget," said Martin; and, taking up his fiddle from a table, he went out, closing the door softly behind him. There came a little cadence of notes--the laugh of the fiddle. Somehow there was the sound of wailing rather than of laughter in it to-night.

CHAPTER XI

THE FUGITIVE AT AYLINGFORD

Barbara Lanison suddenly remembered how much she had thought of the man who stood before her. For the first time she realised that not a day had passed but those grey eyes had seemed to look into hers, even as they did now; that the hours were few into which his image had not come. This meeting was so unexpected, she was so entirely unprepared for it, that she was taken at a disadvantage. It seemed to her that this man must surely know how much he had been in her thoughts, must be reading her like an open book. Her eyes fell, and the colour rushed into her cheeks.

"Why has Martin gone?" she said, turning to the door to recall him, and whatever sense of confusion she experienced, there was a dignity in her movement, and a tone of annoyance in her voice, which showed Crosby that she was proud, and seemed to prove that just now she was angry as well.

"Won't you at least let me thank you for your help?" he asked, taking a step towards her.

"It was nothing," she answered. "By chance I learnt your name, by chance I heard you were in danger, and I sent you a warning. I was in your debt, and I like to pay what I owe."

"You have done that with interest."

"Tell me, why are you here?" she asked.

"Indeed, madam, to answer that question I have need of Martin, too, for he brought me."

"I do not understand, Mr. Crosby--you are Mr. Gilbert Crosby, are you not?"

"Yes; and I do not understand, either," he answered. "I have been under the guidance of Fate and a fiddler, and it would appear that the fiddler, at any rate, has played some trick with me, for I do assure you that he made me suppose he was doing your bidding in bringing me here."

"We call him 'Mad Martin,'" she said with a little laugh. "Will you tell me his tale? It should be interesting, though I fear it must greatly have misled you."

She turned from the door as she spoke, and sat down by the table. Perhaps it was as well Martin had gone, for there was no guessing what he had told this stranger, nor how far he might call upon her to support

his action were he asked suddenly for an explanation.

"It would also be interesting to me to learn who you are, and where I am," said Crosby with a smile.

"You do not know? You have forgotten?" Barbara exclaimed.

"I have not so poor a memory as that," he answered, "and will you deem it presumptuous in me when I say that I hoped it might be you who had rendered me this service? I did not know until Martin lit those candles and you turned towards me. Within a few hours of my seeing you at Newgate I was called away from London. I had no opportunity of making inquiry about you."

"There was no reason why you should," she answered.

"You did not forbid me to do so."

"Indeed, no. I had small chance to do that," Barbara returned. "You disappeared so quickly and mysteriously."

"I had seen you to your friends--why should I wait?"

"If for nothing else, to be thanked. I wondered whether you had recognised an enemy in the neighbourhood of my aunt's coach."

He laughed, but whether at the suggestion, or at her method of trying to draw a confession from him, it was impossible to tell.

"Did you see the highwayman and thank him, as you proposed?" Barbara asked.

"I did, and now it seems he was not this famous Galloping Hermit, after all."

For a moment she was silent, recollecting that she had speculated whether this man himself might not be the wearer of the brown mask.

"I am Barbara Lanison," she said suddenly, "niece to Sir John Lanison of Aylingford Abbey."

"Am I in Aylingford Abbey?" Crosby asked.

"A queer little corner of it appropriated by Martin Fairley. You seem surprised, sir."

"Indeed, I am. I have passed through many surprises during the last few hours, not the least of them being that this is Aylingford, and that you are astonished to see me."

"Perhaps it would be well to tell me your story before Martin returns. You must not forget that he is half a madman, and sometimes talks wildly."

Crosby told her the manner of his escape from Lenfield, as he had told it to Fairley; and if Barbara Lanison did not so obviously disbelieve it as the fiddler had done, her eyes were full of questioning. He explained how "The Jolly Farmers" had been searched, and how he and Martin had ridden away together in the night.

"He told me that he had been bidden by a woman to bring me into a place of safety, and he brought me here. He would tell me nothing more."

"He did not even try and picture the woman for you?"

"Only his fiddle could do that, he declared."

"You see how foolish he is," said Barbara.

"I do not find any great sign of folly in that," Crosby answered.

"I was thinking of your journey, sir. I told Martin to find you if he could and warn you; that was all I bid him do."

"And my coming has displeased you," said Crosby. "I will go on the instant if it be your will."

"No, no; it is my will that you tell me the remainder of the story."

"There is no more to tell."

"You have not told me who the man was who helped you to escape from your manor at Lenfield," said Barbara.

"He desired me not to speak of him, and I must keep faith."

"Yet he told you of Martin."

"He spoke only of a fiddler," said Crosby.

"Have I no means of persuading you to tell me his name?" she said, leaning a little across the table towards him, with a look of pleading in her eyes. Most men would have found the temptation difficult to resist.

"I do not think you would try any means to make a man break his promise," Crosby said.

The grey eyes looked straight into hers, and the voice had that little tone of sternness in it which she had noted that day at Newgate.

"Perhaps not," she said; "but it is provoking. To have a nameless partner in such an affair as this is to have more mystery than I care for."

"Did you ever hear of a Mr. Sydney Fellowes?"

"So you have told me after all," she said, disappointment in her voice. He was not the strong man she supposed him to be--merely one a woman could cajole at her ease. She was too disappointed in him to realise at once how strange it was that he should speak of Sydney Fellowes.

"No, this is another friend," he answered quietly, conscious of what was passing in her mind.

"I know Mr. Fellowes," Barbara said, her brow clearing. "Not many days since he was here at the Abbey."

"He came to see me, but since I was away from home he left a letter warning me that I had enemies. He, too, had been commissioned by someone to warn me."

"Not by me," said Barbara. "Surely you must have been acting unwisely, Mr. Crosby, to have so many enemies?"

"It is the number of my friends which astonishes me more," he returned. "I am wondering what it was you heard about me which made you send to help me."

"It concerned the Duke of Monmouth, and was not to your credit," Barbara said.

"Yet you have helped me."

"I did not believe what was said. Besides, I was in your debt."

"These are times when one must speak with caution if one would dwell in safety," said Crosby. "Whoever accused me of being a supporter of the Duke of Monmouth spoke falsely, yet it is possible that he believed himself justified. I went to see Monmouth at Bridgwater."

"Why?"

"With a hope that I might persuade him to turn back from certain ruin, and so mitigate the misery which he must bring upon the West Country. My pity was rather for the simple peasants than for Monmouth, perhaps; but I know the Duke well, and in the past have been his close friend. You see, your informant may have had some reason for his accusation."

"Then you are for King James?" questioned Barbara. She could not help remembering that the man before her had been classed with those cowards who will betray friends and foes alike so that their own purposes are served and their own safety secured. Was Gilbert Crosby almost confessing to as much?

"I stand apart, taking neither side," he answered. "Believe me, Mistress Lanison, I am only one of many in England to-day who do the same. They are loyal subjects so long as the King remains true to his coronation oath."

"I suppose some might call them cowards and time-servers," she said. She was not deeply learned in politics, and was inclined to let the personal qualities of a man make her hero, no matter which side he fought for. To stand aside and take no part at all always seemed to her rather cowardly. It appeared such an easy way out of a difficulty.

"Some undoubtedly do call them so," Crosby admitted with a shrug of his shoulders, "and perhaps the fact that they are able to hear the accusation and remain unmoved proves them brave men. Still, I feel something like a coward to-night."

"Why?"

"I am wondering whether I ought to have left Lenfield. It is probable that, had I remained, I should have been arrested, perhaps hanged on the nearest tree without trial or question; but, since I am free, my presence in the West might do something to help these poor folk who will

most certainly suffer bitterly for the rebellion."

"What can you do?"

"Truly, I do not know. Assist a few miserable wretches to escape from a brutal soldiery, perhaps--that is all I can think of; but I may see other ways of helping once I am back again. Cannot you advise me? A woman often sees more clearly than a man."

"To advise well, one must know more," said Barbara. "Of you I know little, except what I have heard, and, truly, that would give me a poor opinion of you."

"You have said that you did not believe it."

"Still, you have told me nothing to strengthen that belief," she returned quickly. "There is something more than merely a woman's curiosity in this, for, truly, I am set in the midst of difficulties. Listen! That is Martin on the stairs."

"It is not your will that I leave Aylingford to-night, then?"

"It is poor weather to start upon a journey. Besides, you are Martin's guest, not mine, and--"

The door opened, and Martin entered.

"It is late, mistress. I must see you along the terrace."

"I had not thought of the time," Barbara said, rising quickly and folding her cloak round her.

"There are certain hours in life one does not stay to count," Martin answered, "but they burn candles, for all that. See how much these have lessened since I lighted them."

"I am glad, Martin, that you have brought your guest to a safe place," said Barbara. "Good-night, Mr. Crosby. Perhaps to-morrow you will tell me more."

The door closed, and Crosby was alone. Indeed, there was much more to tell, but the telling was not all for him to do. What was it Barbara Lanison had heard of him which had evidently impressed her unfavourably, although it was perhaps against her will, and who had told her these things? Then, too, this fiddler must be made to speak clearly, for he must surely know a great deal.

Martin Fairley quickly returned, and closed and locked the door.

"There must be some explanation between us," said Crosby. "This lady did not expect me."

"Are you sure of that?"

"She told me so."

"Ah! that is a different matter," Fairley returned sharply. "What kind of a welcome did you expect? Have you done aught to win a more tender greeting?"

"I have done much to anger her by coming here," answered Crosby.

"You were not quarrelling when I entered just now. She spoke of to-morrow. Does a woman leave anything for the morrow if she has no interest in that morrow? You would make a poor lover, Master Crosby."

"To my knowledge I have not been cast for the part."

"We shall see," said Martin, "It's a poor fire that will not boil a kettle, and she's a poor woman who cannot make a man love her if she will. There's to-morrow, and after that you and I may talk a little more freely, perhaps. For to-night I only want sleep. I can fiddle from dusk to dawn and forget that I have not closed my eyes, but a night in the saddle--ah! my poor knees, Master Crosby! I was never meant for a horseman." And he laughed, the same notes in the laugh as came from the fiddle when it laughed.

He was half a madman--Barbara Lanison had said so--and Crosby was convinced that there was little information to be got out of him, either then or at any other time.

The next morning broke grey and sombre over Aylingford, yet Barbara woke to find the world brighter and more interesting than she had found it for a long time; perhaps it had never been quite so bright before. And yet there were clouds in it, wreaths of doubt which would not clear away. She must know more of this man Gilbert Crosby before she trusted him fully--and she wanted to trust him. Martin had told her many things in the past; she had meant to ask Martin whether she ought to stay at Aylingford; now she had a desire to take her fears to Gilbert Crosby. He had seemed so strong that day at Newgate; ever since then she had grown to believe more and more that he was a man to be relied upon in trouble, and last night--was she a little disappointed in him?

"I have expected so much," she said to herself. "Perhaps a man is never all that a woman expects him to be."

She went early to the tower, almost afraid that he might have gone in the night. He was there, and Martin left them much together that day. In the afternoon they sat side by side on one of the broken pieces of masonry in the ruins, while Martin lounged by the door opening on to the terrace; and there was little of Crosby's life that Barbara had not been told before the dusk came. She did not question that he had told her the truth. And much about herself Barbara told him, but not yet of the evil which hung over Aylingford. She could not tell him that yet, and there was time enough, for she had advised that he should remain at the Abbey for a little while.

"I believe your enemies are private ones, and would only use this rebellion against you as a means to an end," she said. "When it is known that you took no part with Monmouth you will be free to deal with your enemies."

"You are not angry that I came, then?"

"No; and, besides, you may perchance do me a great service."

"How? Only tell me how," he whispered, and there was a new note in his voice which sent a thrill into her very soul and yet made her shrink

from him a little.

"To-morrow--perhaps to-morrow I will tell you."

So the clouds of doubt were driven away, and yet they returned again as she sat in her room that evening, for she would not go again to the tower until to-morrow. Someone might have seen her go in that direction and wondered why she had spent so many hours in the ruins. She was angry with herself for allowing such doubts to enter her mind, but, try as she would, she could not force them out.

There came a knock upon her door presently, and a servant entered to request that she would go to Sir John.

"He is in his own room," said the servant, "and bid me say that he was waiting for you."

It was so unusual for her uncle to send for her that Barbara wondered what had happened to make her immediate presence necessary. Had Sir John found out that there was a visitor in the tower, and wished to question her? As she went she endeavoured to make up her mind what she should say if Gilbert Crosby's presence at Aylingford were the reason she was sent for.

Sir John's room opened out of the great hall. It was of fair proportions, panelled from floor to ceiling and lighted by three long windows with leaded glass and stone mullions. At one end was a huge fireplace, looking cold and empty in summer-time, and over it, and elsewhere in the room, branches for candles were fixed in the wall. Only the candles over the fireplace were lighted to-night, and much of the room was in shadow. Curtains hung across the entrance door.

"You sent for me," said Barbara as she parted them, and then she stopped, her hands still grasping the curtains.

Her uncle rose from the writing table beside which he was seated, although it was evident he had not been writing; but it was not upon him her eyes were fixed, but upon the man who turned from the fireplace and bowed low to her.

It was Lord Rosmore!

CHAPTER XII

BARBARA HELPS TO CLOSE A DOOR

There was no doubt in Barbara's mind that the presence of Lord Rosmore at Aylingford boded no good to the man who was at that moment in the tower across the ruins. She was to be questioned concerning him. What was she to say that could be the truth while not harming him?

In Lord Rosmore's mind there was no doubt that the woman before him, framed by the curtains which she held, was very beautiful, a possession much to be desired. There was nothing on earth he would not do to make her his own. It was a vow he had registered before; he registered it

anew as he stood erect and Barbara advanced into the room.

"You are back sooner than I expected from the West, Lord Rosmore," said Barbara.

"Lord Rosmore comes upon a grave matter," said Sir John, and his face was serious enough to give his words ample meaning, "a matter that concerns us all. I fear there are days of trouble in front of us, and I am too old for such things."

"Your uncle takes too melancholy a view of a circumstance which was beyond his control," said Rosmore.

"Beyond it--yes, but can I prove that it was so?" asked Sir John.

"There are many ways," said Rosmore. "Sir John, Mistress Barbara, would have you sent for, although I begged him not to disturb you. I had mentioned your name--I could hardly help doing so--but with no intention of dragging you into a matter with which you have really nothing to do."

"Tell her, Rosmore," said Sir John. "She may have more concern in it than you imagine."

"Rebellion brings many things in its train, Mistress Barbara--the hunting and punishment of those who rebel, for instance; unfortunately, some of this hunting has fallen to my lot," said Rosmore, and he had the air of gently concealing some of the horrors he had witnessed from his fair listener. "I was commanded to arrest one Gilbert Crosby, of Lenfield, and it was in speaking of him that I mentioned your name. You will remember that we spoke of him on one occasion."

"I remember. It was you who told me his name," said Barbara; and, whatever fears were in her mind, she spoke with absolute indifference.

"As I told you then, he is a man of most contemptible character," Rosmore went on, "a cowardly enemy and a dangerous friend. And he is something more. We surrounded his house at Lenfield; we saw him enter, and then I rode to the door, demanding to see him. The servant went to call him, and returned to say she could not find him. A few moments later he appeared from the direction of the stables, mounted on the most splendid animal I have ever seen. Cantering across the open park, he eluded our pursuit by putting his horse at a fence that I should have sworn was impossible to take had I not seen that animal take it. It was a marvellous leap, and I grant you this man is no mean horseman; but, Mistress Barbara, his outward appearance was changed. For the time being he was no longer Gilbert Crosby, the rebel, but Galloping Hermit, the highwayman, and wore a brown mask."

"I would I had seen the leap," said Barbara impulsively as a child might say it; and both men, who knew her love for horses, heard nothing but genuine excitement in her remark. It concealed her real thoughts. If this story were true, Gilbert Crosby had deceived her.

"We followed him, but not over the fence," said Rosmore, "and a long, stern chase began. We had no horse amongst us to match the highwayman's. He could have left us behind sooner than he did, but he was playing a cunning game. I divided my men, and whilst some followed him, I and two stout fellows turned aside with the object of cutting him off when he doubled on his tracks, as I was convinced he would do."

"You take a great while coming to the point," grumbled Sir John.

"Indeed, uncle, I think Lord Rosmore tells the story most excellently," said Barbara. "I am all excitement to know with what success you met."

"We failed to take him," said Rosmore. "There was no choice left but to let him go, and I admit I was disappointed as I rode through the village, close to an inn we had searched, on my way to beg a night's entertainment from my friend, Sir Philip Faulkner. There was some kind of feast in the village, and in a barn by the roadside there was dancing going on to the scraping of a fiddle. I have no soul for music, but the notes of that fiddle haunted my sleep that night and all the next day as I rode back to Lenfield. At Lenfield I understood why. That little sequence of notes was familiar to me. You must often have heard it yourself. I was convinced that the fiddler was none other than Martin Fairley."

"Martin!" exclaimed Barbara. "Surely he would not be so far afield?"

"I asked myself the same question," said Rosmore, "and I acted promptly as well. I have often warned Sir John that there was method in Martin's madness, and in this case, at any rate, I was right. Yesterday Martin travelled back towards Aylingford in company with a stranger. Unless I am in error, that stranger was Gilbert Crosby, otherwise known as Galloping Hermit, and I have taken care to guard every road of escape from the Abbey to-night."

"Certainly a wise precaution," said Barbara quietly; "but how does it concern me?"

"Can you swear that you did not send Martin to bring this fellow to Aylingford?" said Sir John. "You certainly had some interest in this man Crosby, and Martin would try and do your bidding if you asked him to fetch you the moon."

"My interest was surely natural," Barbara answered, "for I assure you I was in an unpleasant situation at Newgate when this man came to my rescue--Lord Rosmore has doubtless told you the circumstances--but I certainly did not send Martin to bring this man to Aylingford."

She laughed lightly as though the mere suggestion were absurd. So far she could answer honestly, but she dreaded the next question.

"I do not suppose my niece would do such a thing," returned Sir John, "but the world is hardly likely to have the same faith in her. I warrant even you have your doubts, Lord Rosmore."

"I assure you, Mistress Barbara, your uncle has no reason to suggest such a thing," said Rosmore. "As I have said, I am told off for unpleasant duty, and that duty has brought me to Aylingford to arrest a rebel, and compels me also to arrest Martin for assisting a rebel."

"Poor Martin! A madman!" said Barbara.

"I have much doubt as to his madness," was the answer, "but you have only to persist, and those doubts shall vanish. If you desire it, Martin shall escape--you have my word for that."

Barbara was alert. She was prepared to have traps set for her, and had no intention of stepping into them if she could help it.

"That is generous of you, Lord Rosmore," she said, thanking him with a curtsy, "but I would not ask you to neglect your duty."

"Nonsense, child," said Sir John, who seemed irritated by this bandying of words. "You talk ignorantly. For my part I am most anxious that Lord Rosmore should not do his whole duty. If he did, he would report Aylingford Abbey and ourselves suspect. I am most desirous that he should remember friendship as well as duty--indeed, I have already urged this upon him."

"That is true, but Sir John is too anxious in this matter."

"You know perfectly well that I am justified in that anxiety," Sir John returned. "The King is as bitter, even more bitter, against those who assist rebels than against the rebels themselves. This fool Martin has brought disaster to our doors, and we have got to meet it promptly. It is well that you should understand this clearly, Barbara," he went on, turning to his niece. "No one will believe that Martin has acted entirely by himself in this matter, and since you have confessed some interest in this fellow Crosby, you are suspect, let Lord Rosmore hide the fact as he will."

"Bear me witness, this is your uncle's declaration, not mine," said Rosmore.

"It is a hard fact, that is what concerns us," said Sir John; "and it becomes necessary to prove beyond question that we are heart and soul for King James. There is one way that you may easily do so, Barbara. You will remember a conversation I had with you recently concerning Lord Rosmore. He wished--"

"I pray you, Sir John, this is not the moment to thrust my wishes upon your niece."

"I say it is," was the sharp answer. "I have wit enough to see the safest road, and to take it. Since it is also a pleasant road, why should there be any hesitation or delay?"

Rosmore shrugged his shoulders, and with a helpless glance at Barbara turned to contemplate the great iron dogs in the fireplace, kicking a log which lay there with some impatience. The conversation had taken a turn which was not to his liking, it seemed.

"You remember the conversation to which I refer, Barbara?"

"Perfectly, uncle."

"Lord Rosmore has done us the honour to ask your hand in marriage. My own satisfaction may have made me a little too hasty in telling you. You were naturally unprepared, and, womanlike, were inclined to resent any idea of being forced into a marriage. Since then, however, you have had time to consider the matter. You may guess my own feelings concerning such an alliance. From the moment Lord Rosmore spoke to me I have seen nothing but advantage in it. Now, there is an additional reason why your answer should not be delayed. Affianced to Lord Rosmore, whose whole interests lie with the King, no one would dare suggest that you had had

the slightest sympathy for a rebel, or that Aylingford had ever willingly opened its gates to a fugitive from Monmouth's rabble army. Martin's indiscretion puts you in danger. If by some careless word you are responsible for that indiscretion, which may very likely be the case, you are in grave danger. Rosmore is not here alone, and though he may be silent, other tongues will wag. Is it not so, my lord?"

"I do not wish to bias your niece," Rosmore answered, without turning from the fireplace.

Barbara was in a hard case. The man in the tower was trapped; Martin, too, would be arrested. By a word she could save Martin; possibly Lord Rosmore might be induced to let Crosby also slip through his fingers. If she consented to marry him she felt that she might persuade him to anything. The thought brought a quick reaction. If she could persuade him to anything, he was not a man to trust. Duty should come first, no matter how insidiously a woman might tempt. She did not trust Rosmore. She remembered the evil in his face that night in the hall when she had stood between him and Sydney Fellowes. She remembered Gilbert Crosby; his grey eyes seemed to look into hers at this moment. He must be saved--but how?

"I think you exaggerate the danger, uncle," she said quietly. "Surely a madman's folly is not sufficient to condemn us?"

"I have told you the truth. Ask Lord Rosmore."

"Will you tell me, please?"

"Sir John forces my hand," said Rosmore, turning quickly towards her. For an instant he seemed angry, but his face softened as he looked at her. "I am torn between love and duty. Sir John speaks truly. Another in my place to-night, one who had only his duty to consider, would probably arrest both you and your uncle on suspicion, and you would have to prove your innocence as best you might. King James is determined to trample out this rebellion, and even some innocent persons may suffer."

Barbara did not speak when he paused. She had glanced at her uncle and wondered whether this might be some plot between these two to force her to this marriage. She distrusted her uncle as much as, if not more than, she did Lord Rosmore.

"If I consent?" she said.

Rosmore made a step towards her, and Sir John looked up quickly. They were suddenly as men who had played a desperate game and won.

"I said 'If,'" and she shrank back a little, unconscious how beautiful she looked in that moment.

"Consent to be my wife, and there is nothing that you can ask me that I will not do--nothing. Do you understand--nothing?"

"And if I say 'No'?"

Anger came back into Rosmore's face for an instant, but it was gone in a moment.

"Even so I could not do my duty," he said slowly. "I should ask that

another might take my place, and then--"

"Then the heavy hand of the King upon us," said Sir John.

"I must think. You cannot expect me to answer now, at once," said Barbara.

"Duty may not wait," said Sir John.

"You shall have my answer to-morrow, Lord Rosmore," Barbara said. "I must have the night to decide. Duty does not compel you to march Mad Martin from Aylingford to-night."

"I will give you until to-morrow," he answered.

Barbara curtsied low and turned to the door.

Rosmore drew back the curtains for her, and as she passed out whispered:

"I love you, sweetheart. Say 'Yes' to-morrow."

"Will she consent, think you?" Sir John asked as Rosmore came slowly back across the room.

"I think so; yes, I think so."

"I spoke sufficiently?" questioned Sir John.

"You were excellently diplomatic. Were she a woman easily frightened there would be no doubt of her answer. Your guests in the Abbey, Sir John, must not know of my presence here, nor that the place is watched to-night."

"You are sure that Martin brought this man Crosby to Aylingford?"

"Quite sure."

"Why not take him to-night, quietly?" said Sir John. "If he is with Martin, he is probably in the old tower by the ruins. Is he most rebel or most highwayman?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because, if he is most highwayman, you might influence Barbara's answer to-morrow by letting him escape."

"I have thought of it, but--"

"My niece and a highwayman! She may be romantic, my lord, but she is not a fool."

"Gad! Sir John, you are lost here in Hampshire; you should be beside the King to advise him. If we let him go to-morrow, this knight of the road may easily meet with an accident. In my company it should not be difficult to find a man or two who can shoot straight. Your niece's romance might prove inconvenient to me if Galloping Hermit were still in the land of the living."

"Settle that as you will," said Sir John, "but arrest him to-night."

As soon as the door had closed behind her Barbara crossed the hall quickly; but she did not return to her own apartments. She had made her plans while she listened to her uncle and Lord Rosmore. Now, she hurried along a corridor to a small door opening on to the terrace, hardly ever used except by herself when she went to talk to Martin in the tower. Between it and the ruins there was not much of the terrace to travel, and the shadows were deep. The sharpest eyes might fail to see a moving figure amongst them. Barbara ran lightly, her skirts gathered from her feet, and, entering the ruins, went quickly to the tower. The door was shut, but not locked, and she mounted the winding stairs to Martin's room. It was in darkness.

"Martin!" she called softly, but there was no answer.

Had Crosby got knowledge of his danger, and gone? Even now he might be in the hands of his enemies, for were not all the ways of escape watched to-night? What could she do?

She stood for a few moments undecided how to act. She must not be found there by her uncle or Lord Rosmore who might seek her there if by chance they discovered that she had not returned to her own rooms. Almost certainly they would have her watched to-night. Yet she must stay to warn Martin and Gilbert Crosby, if by chance they were still ignorant of their danger. It would never do for them to be caught in the tower, from which there was no hope of escape.

There was a small landing outside the room. At the top of the winding stairs there was a door, fastened back by a clamp, and Barbara had never known this door to be shut. Another winding stair led to the flat roof of the tower, where Martin often spent hours, reading the future in the stars, he said. She went to the roof now, but it was empty, and she came down again quickly. Perhaps they were sitting in the ruins, and had not heard her. She would go and see. As she descended a sound came to her--running feet--and through one of the narrow slits which gave a dim light to the stairs in daytime she discerned two men crossing the ruins. It was so dark in the tower that she could see them easily. They were not half-way across when other men came running from the terrace, but the fugitives could easily have reached the tower and closed the door upon their pursuers had not one of them caught his foot and fallen. It was Gilbert Crosby; he did not know every stone as Martin did. He was on his feet again directly, but the advantage had been lost. Barbara went down a little farther until she was just hidden by the first bend in the stairs. There was the sudden clash of steel, and a pistol-shot rang out upon the night. All was confusion in the doorway just below her. Then two men came up slowly, and backwards, thrusting downwards as they came, and more than one groan told that the steel had done its work.

"Be ready to rush when I give the word," Martin whispered; "then, at the top, make a stand--we must close the door there somehow."

The stairs were too narrow for two men to fight side by side. Martin was a step or two below his companion, and it was no longer a fiddle bow which he held in his hand. It was doubtful whether he had ever used his bow so well as he used a sword to-night.

Barbara leaned down.

"I am here, Mr. Crosby. I came to warn you," she whispered. "I know the

door. Tell Martin."

She went up quickly. The clamp which held the door back at the head of the stairs was stiff, but with her weight thrown against the woodwork to ease the pressure she managed to unfasten it. The door creaked loudly as she drew it forward. Possibly Martin heard the noise, for a moment later he shouted, and he and Crosby rushed on to the landing.

"Into the room, mistress," Martin whispered, as he swung the door to and shot the bolt. "It won't hold long, but long enough." Then he followed them quickly into his room and locked the door.

Two men lay on the narrow stairs grievously hurt, and there was blood flowing from a cut on the face of another man as he threw himself against the door at the top, bent on settling a score rather than taking a rebel. He cursed and called to those below him.

"It is a small matter," said Rosmore. "It shuts us out, but it shuts them in."

"The door will not take much breaking down," said Sir John; "the rot of years must be in it."

There was some delay while a heavy bar was found with which to attack the door, and a light to see by. The door at the head of the stairs soon yielded, but that of the room was another matter. It was of stout oak, and Sir John seemed to think that Martin might be persuaded to open it.

"Martin! Martin!" he called, knocking as he did so. There was movement within, but no answer. "Martin! This riot is no concern of yours. Open! I have a message for you from Mistress Barbara."

Again there was movement within, and someone spoke in a low voice, but Sir John got no answer.

"Your madman is defiant," said Rosmore. "We shall have to teach him better manners. We must break in the door, Sir John."

The first blow of the bar fell heavily, and there came a sudden answer, a quick sequence of notes--the laugh of the fiddle--then silence. Blow upon blow followed quickly, but there was no answering sound from within.

"Beat where the lock is," said Rosmore. "It gives there, I think; and be on the defensive, Sir John. We have certainly one desperate man to deal with--I think two."

With a crash the lock suddenly gave way, and the door swung open; but no rush of attack came out of the darkness. One man carried the light in and held it high above his head. There was no movement, no sound.

The room was empty!

CHAPTER XIII

THE WAY OF ESCAPE

"That was warm work while it lasted," said Martin as he locked the door. "They will easily break the first door, but this, at any rate, is good stout oak, and will keep them out for a little while. Wait; I will light a candle."

"We have no way of escape, so they may take what time they will," said Crosby, and then, as the candle shed a dim light in the room, he turned to Barbara. "How can I thank you?--yet I would you were not here. My coming to Aylingford has brought you grievous trouble."

"There was trouble before you came; it does not seem to me much greater now," she answered.

"Spoken like a philosopher," said Martin, laying his sword on the table beside the fiddle and the bow.

"And, truly, Martin, you fight like a soldier," said Barbara.

"The occasion makes the man, mistress. For the moment I was a soldier, and had forgotten the fiddle bow. But speak low; they will be upon the landing in a moment, and I would not have them know that you are here. Did anyone see you come to the ruins?"

"I think not."

"Good! There are more ways than one of cheating an enemy."

"But we are caught here, Martin--here in the tower." And she put a hand upon the arm of this mad dreamer, as though she would rouse him to action, and cast an appealing glance at Crosby to add his efforts to hers.

"I know, I know. We are locked in my tower. There is no place like it in Aylingford Abbey." And Martin sat down on a low stool by the open hearth and began pushing back the sticks and rubbish which lay there into a heap, as if it were his intention to light a fire.

"Come, Master Fairley, rise once more to the occasion," said Crosby.

"I'm sitting down to it this time," was the answer. "Riding made my knees sore, and fighting has put an ache in my back."

"They have not gained the landing yet," urged Crosby. "Is there not a way to the roof? With a rope we might at least get Mistress Lanison to the ground in safety."

"Yes, Martin, possibly we might all get down from the roof without being seen," said Barbara. "But every way of escape from the Abbey is watched to-night," she went on, turning to Crosby. "Lord Rosmore said so."

"Then we gain little by climbing from the roof if we could do so, which we cannot," said Fairley. "First, I have no rope; secondly--ah! that will do for a second reason. They are upon the landing."

As he spoke the door at the head of the stairs crashed open, and there was a rush of feet without.

"Can you hide Mistress Lanison?" whispered Crosby to Martin, glancing round the room. "They are not likely to search if you and I open the door to them."

Barbara started back, perhaps expecting the room door to burst in suddenly, perhaps to protest that she intended to share the danger, whatever it might be. Her ankle was suddenly seized and held tightly.

"Have a care, mistress," said Martin in a low tone, and, looking down at him, Barbara saw that where the hearth-stone had been there was now a hole. "There is one way that is not watched to-night, I warrant--this way."

He rose quickly from the stool and touched Crosby's arm.

"Go first. There are steps. Take my sword as well as your own. Then you, mistress. I come last to shut this up again."

There was a loud knock at the door. "Martin! Martin!"

"Sir John!" he whispered, and held up his finger to command silence.

"Martin! This riot is no concern of yours. Open! I have a message for you from Mistress Barbara."

"Quickly! They do not know you are here," whispered Martin.

Crosby went down into darkness, and held his hand to Barbara to steady her. Their heads had sunk below the floor level when the first blow was struck at the door. Martin had extinguished the candle and seized his fiddle. With his foot on the steps he drew the bow sharply across the strings--a little laugh. Then he went down, and at a touch the hearth-stone came slowly back into its ordinary position.

After going down straight for a little way the stairs began to wind, and were so narrow that a man had only just room enough to pass. Crosby led the way carefully, leaning back a little lest Barbara should stumble in the darkness and fall. From behind, Martin whispered his instructions. They came presently to a landing which widened out, and here Martin took the lead.

"Give me your hand, mistress. Carefully--there are six more steps," and Martin counted them as he went down. "So, we are now below the floor of the ruined hall. Mad Martin was not to be caught in a trap so easily."

"And now which way do we go? We are still in the Abbey," said Barbara.

"A man might stay here a long time undiscovered, but that is not my plan. Mr. Crosby shall be leaving the Abbey behind long before his enemies have given up hunting for him."

"Martin, I must go too," said Barbara. "There are reasons--many reasons."

"Many reasons why you must stay for the present," said Martin. "Trust me, mistress; it is more dangerous for you to leave the Abbey just now than to remain."

"You do not understand, Martin. Lord Rosmore--"

"Fairley is right," said Crosby. "We found that the Abbey was watched to-night. By one of the bridges on the other side of the stream we overheard two men talking. Cursing their vigil, they declared that Rosmore was bent on private revenge--that my arrest was of his own scheming. He has already had some of my servants sent to Dorchester, and I must ride there without delay to save them."

"But you will be taken."

"Would that be a reason for not going?"

"No," she answered quickly. "No; you must go."

"And you must do nothing to associate yourself with me in any way. It was a chance that Martin brought me here, more of my contriving than his--do you understand? All you know of Gilbert Crosby is that he once came to your assistance at Newgate."

She did not answer immediately. In the darkness Crosby could hear a little quick intake of her breath and a slight rustle of her gown.

"Does Martin go with you?" she asked after a pause.

"A little way to put him on the road; then I shall return to Aylingford," Fairley said.

"You must not. It will not be safe for you."

"Never fear, mistress. Lord Rosmore cannot remain here, and no one else will care a jot whether Mad Martin comes or goes. Come, there must be no more delay. You must be back in your room if they should chance to call for you when they return from the ruins. Indeed, you must contrive to let them know that you are there. You will wait for me, Mr. Crosby. Your hand once more, mistress."

She stretched out her arm, and her hand was taken, but it was not Martin who took it.

"Thank you for all you have done for me," whispered Crosby. "It is more than you have knowledge of; as yet, it is almost beyond my own comprehension. There will come happier times--quickly, I trust--then I may thank you better. Then, I would have you remember something more of Gilbert Crosby than that he came to you that day in Newgate."

Then lips were pressed upon her hand, homage and reverence in the touch.

"I shall think of you and pray for you," she answered.

"I am waiting, mistress," said Martin. "I am here; your hand is difficult to find in the darkness."

It was the other arm Barbara stretched out, and so for an instant she stood, both hands firmly held, linked to these two men.

Martin led the way quickly, and certainly, as one who had made the journey often and knew every step of it. At first there was a faint echo of their footfalls, speaking of a wide space about them, but they were soon in a passage which became gradually narrower, then they began to

ascend, for a little way by a sharp incline, and afterwards by a winding staircase.

"Martin," Barbara said suddenly, "I am in real danger. Lord Rosmore wishes to marry me. To-night he gave me his word that you should go free, and I think I could persuade him to let Mr. Crosby escape, if I consent to be his wife. I have until to-morrow morning to give him an answer."

"To-morrow morning he will have no prisoners to bargain with," Fairley answered.

"Nevertheless, he will want an answer. If he does not get the answer he wants, I am likely to be accused of helping rebels."

"Is that what he threatens? You are not a woman to be frightened by threats. You must meet deceit with deceit. Answer neither 'Yea' nor 'Nay' for a while. He will wait if you let him suppose your answer may be 'Yea.'"

"My uncle is insistent," said Barbara.

"Should you be pressed in such a fashion that there is no escape, mistress, say this to Sir John: 'It is a sacred trust; God requite you if you fail in it. When she is of age, give her that which is hers. She is free.' Tell him that these words were spoken to you out of the darkness, and then there followed a single word spoken low--'Beware!' Can you remember them? They must be exact. It is true you have heard them out of the darkness, and you will not say that Mad Martin spoke them."

"And then, Martin?"

"He will be afraid of you; but do not speak the words unless you are obliged. Let me hear you repeat them."

Barbara said them carefully and correctly.

"Good," said Martin. "You are armed with a weapon that can hardly fail, and you shall not be left long to fight the battle alone. Courage, mistress; there comes an end to the blackest hours, and surely into yours there has penetrated a beam of light. Is it not so?"

"Perhaps, Martin."

"Another step. So. Pass on, mistress, and good-night."

Barbara's foot suddenly pressed a soft rug instead of the hard stone of the stairs; it was still dark, but not black as it had been; there was a faint stirring of the air about her, and then a scarcely audible sound behind her, which for a moment had no meaning for her. Then she saw the dim outline of a window above, and to her right, at some little distance, a narrow line of light. She was in the corridor out of which her own apartments opened, and behind her was the panelled wall!

She went quickly to her room. The candles were burning as she had left them when bidden to go to her uncle. How swiftly the moments had passed since then, yet how much had happened in them! A kiss was still burning on her hand, and she raised the hand to her lips, blushing and accusing

herself of folly as she did so. Then she threw the casement wide open and leaned out to listen.

A murmur of sound came from the ruins. Had they forced the door and found the room empty? It was certain that there were men in the ruins. Suddenly there came another sound, the clatter of horses' hoofs on the stones of the courtyard. Were these new arrivals at the Abbey, or were men mounting in haste to scour the country for the fugitives? She must know, and yet Martin had said that she must let them understand that she was in her own room to-night.

There were quick footsteps below her window.

"I think they must be along the terrace, sir," said a servant; "both my master and Lord Rosmore."

"I thought it was a haunted spot which no one cared for after dark," was the answer in a voice which sounded familiar to Barbara.

"So it is, sir, but to-night there's something afoot which--" And then they passed out of Barbara's hearing. She leaned out of the window, looking towards the ruins, and saw a man with a torch come out on to the terrace. He shouted, and two or three other men joined him. The servant and the visitor went forward quickly, and entered the ruins as the shouting ceased. Still Barbara did not move; they must know she was in her room, Martin had said--and Mad Martin had proved himself wondrous wise and clever to-night. So she waited, and the moments were leaden-footed. Presently three men came from the ruins and along the terrace. Barbara heard her uncle's voice.

"What is it?" she said, leaning down. "I am afraid."

All three men stopped and looked up. The new arrival was Sydney Fellowes.

"I am frightened at so much stir at this time of the night," she said.

"It is nothing, Barbara," said Sir John.

They had seen her. She need remain in her room no longer, and she flew along the corridor and down the stairs in time to meet them as they entered the hall.

Fellowes bowed low to her. His dress was dusty. He had evidently ridden far.

"Dare I hope that you have repented, and that to-morrow seems too long to wait?" said Rosmore.

"There has been such riot I have had no time to think of other matters. What does it mean, uncle?"

"That Mr. Fellowes has ridden from Lord Feversham, commanding Rosmore's presence in Dorsetshire."

"So unless we capture this rebel of ours to-night, Mistress Lanison, I shall have to leave some of my men to do it," said Rosmore. "I must depart to-morrow morning, and you must--you will give me my answer before I go?"

"It is news to me that Crosby of Lenfield has been named as a rebel," said Fellowes.

"It was news to me until I had my commands," said Rosmore.

"Lord Feversham bid me tell you to return with all the men you could muster. I do not envy you your employment. Kirke's lambs are already too busy for my liking."

"You go no further to-night, Mr. Fellowes?" said Sir John.

"Yes, towards London. I bear despatches to the King at Whitehall. I have accomplished one part of my errand; I must hasten to complete the other. A stirrup cup as you suggested, Sir John, and then to horse. Good-night, Mistress Lanison."

Fellowes and her uncle moved away, leaving Barbara with Rosmore.

"You may sleep late to-morrow if you will give me my answer to-night," he said.

"I cannot force love, Lord Rosmore; I will not say 'Yes' without it."

"It shall dawn with the speaking of one little word."

"Wait until you return," pleaded Barbara. "How do I know that you will not take Martin to-night, and be unable to free him to-morrow."

"You have my word."

"Your word against my love; it is too unequal a bargain. If you ride with my promise to-morrow, you must leave Martin with me. He has been my mad playfellow ever since I can remember."

"You have my word," said Rosmore, "it must suffice."

"And to all my pleading you only answer with threats," said Barbara. "Indeed, my lord, that is a rough path to a woman's heart. There is still the night for me, and for you; I pray that you will have chosen another road before the morning."

She turned and left him, all the coquette that was in her displayed to win him to a better mood. She had little hope of succeeding, but she was very sure that he should ride away with no promise of hers. There was another, by this time rapidly leaving Aylingford behind him she hoped, who bore with him, not her promise, he had not asked for that, but her thoughts and her prayers. If these were any shield from danger, surely he went in safety.

It was quite evident to Barbara that neither her uncle nor Lord Rosmore intended her to know what had happened that night; what line they would take to-morrow she could not guess, but she had already hinted to Lord Rosmore that in exchange for her promise he must leave Martin free at the Abbey with her. This he could not do if Martin and Gilbert Crosby had got away safely, and she believed they had done so.

Barbara could not sleep. The most fantastic happenings seemed possible through the long hours of wakefulness. Martin might see his companion

far enough upon the road to render his capture unlikely, and then return at once. If he came before Lord Rosmore departed, what excuse would be left her for not fulfilling her part of the bargain? Towards morning this fear began to dwarf all others, and an intense longing to be certain that Martin had not returned took possession of her. She was always an early riser; there would be no reason for comment if she were found upon the terrace soon after the sun had risen. She would have no need to find an excuse, because her habit was well known.

It was a silent and beautiful world into which she stepped. The Abbey was still asleep, no sound came from the servants' quarters at present, nor the clink of a pail-handle from the stables. If they were waking in the village yonder, they were welcoming the new day in silence. Barbara's footfall on the stone flags of the terrace rang strangely loud in the morning air, and she went slowly, pausing to look across the woods and down into the stream. Hidden men might still be watching, or someone, whose night had been as wakeful as her own, might see her from one of the windows. She must act as though she had no thought beyond the full enjoyment of the early morning. Slowly, and with many pauses, she made her way towards the ruins, and passed in after standing at the door absorbed in contemplation of the beauty of the scene about her. She hummed the tune of a little ballad to herself, and sat down on the first convenient piece of fallen masonry. If men were watching this place she would give them ample opportunity to ask what her business there might be. Not a movement, not a sound disturbed her. The door into the tower stood open; she wondered what had become of the men who had groaned last night, and must have fallen on the narrow stairs; and she shuddered a little at the thought of some hastily contrived grave, quite close to her, perchance. She had no intention of entering the tower, only to show herself in the ruins; surely if Martin were in hiding there he would contrive some means to let her know. Still humming the ballad, slightly louder than before, she went a little farther into the ruins, and stopped by a piece of fallen stone-work which had constantly afforded her a resting-place. It was here that Gilbert Crosby had caught his foot and stumbled last night as he and Martin had run from their pursuers; it was just here that the swords had first clashed, and the men had run eagerly together upon their prey; here, probably, a little later, Sydney Fellowes had given Lord Feversham's message to Lord Rosmore. Barbara would go no further. If men were watching they should see that she had no intention of entering the tower.

As she sat down she saw close by the stone, half trampled into the loose dust which surrounded it, a piece of cloth or linen, cut sharply, it seemed. The work of one of those clashing swords, Barbara thought, as she stooped and drew it out of the dust, and then a little half-strangled cry escaped her. It was a piece of coarse silk, brown in colour. In her hand she held a brown mask!

CHAPTER XIV

A WOMAN REBELS

The Abbey awoke earlier than usual this morning. It would be some hours yet before Mrs. Dearmer, radiant from the hands of her maid, came forth to face the world and God's good sun, and there were men with heads

racked from last night's deep potations who would still lie abed and curse their ill-luck; but there was noisy bustle in the stable yards, the champing of bits and jingling of harness, and in the servants' quarters a hurrying to and fro with eager haste, and a pungent atmosphere of cooking food. Lord Rosmore was starting for Dorsetshire within the hour, and his men were being fed with that liberality for which the Abbey was famous.

Barbara sat on one of the stone seats let into the wall overlooking the stream. Lord Rosmore would see her there and come for his answer. She had no intention of trying to escape the interview; she had no doubt what answer she would give, yet there was trouble in her heart. The mask of brown silk which lay concealed in the bosom of her dress struck at the very roots of her belief in a man's truth and honour. Lord Rosmore had told her no falsehood, no made-up tale to suit his own purposes as she supposed, and it was impossible for her not to think less harshly of him as she saw him come out on to the terrace with her uncle. Sir John, with some jesting remark, walked slowly in the opposite direction, and Lord Rosmore came quickly towards her. He bowed low with that grace which had made him famous amongst men, and which no woman had ever attempted to deny him. There was not a cloud upon his brow, and a little smile played at the corners of his mouth as though he had already received his answer--the answer he desired.

"On such a gracious morning as this am I to be made the happiest man on whom the sun shines, Mistress Lanison?"

"I asked for a longer time, Lord Rosmore."

"I wish I could give it," he returned. "There is nothing that I would rather do than stay here to convince you how true and deep my love is; but, alas! duty calls me away upon no pleasant mission."

"But you will return," said Barbara.

"Not for some weeks, I fear, and in them what may not happen? I would take my happiness with me--your promise--not wait in anxious doubt."

"Love has not come to me yet; it might come when you return," Barbara said. "Without love I will not give my promise to any man."

"Love will come," was the answer; "and, besides, love is not the whole of marriage. There are other reasons often--indeed, almost always--for giving a promise."

"Is it bargaining, you mean?"

"I would not call it by such a name," said Rosmore. "The alliance which satisfies parents and guardians, which sends a man and a woman walking side by side along a worthy road in the world, giving each to each what the other lacks, a good, useful comradeship which keeps at arm's length the world's cares, surely this makes a true marriage, and into it, believe me, love will come."

"It may, Lord Rosmore, but I am not yet persuaded that the road is worthy, nor that such a comradeship between us could bring good. Believe me, you will be far wiser to give me time. Wait for your answer until you return."

"I fear to find the bird stolen," he said.

"I am not so desirable a possession as you imagine," she answered, with an effort to bring an element of banter into the interview.

"You cannot see yourself at this moment, Mistress Lanison, or you would not say so. I must have your answer. Are there not many, many reasons why you should give me your promise?"

"You will come to this lower level of bargaining," said Barbara.

"I have no choice."

"I have shown you a wise road to take," she answered; "wait until you come back from Dorsetshire."

"I cannot wait."

"Then if we bargain, Lord Rosmore, you must remember that there are always two sides to a bargain. You do not show me Martin Fairley a free man."

"I can hardly set free a man I have not taken prisoner. Martin and the highwayman succeeded in getting away from the Abbey last night. Until we saw you leaning from your window, Sir John was absurd enough to declare that you must have warned them."

"My uncle seems strangely anxious to make a rebel of me," said Barbara. "I hold to our bond. Martin Fairley is not here, therefore I give no promise this morning."

"I do not remember agreeing to such a bargain," said Rosmore.

"It pleases me," said Barbara, "and helps me to forget that you began by threatening me. I am not a woman to be frightened by a threat."

"Then you will give me no promise?"

"No; but if you persist I will give you an answer, and promise that it shall be a final one."

"I would spare myself the indignity of a direct repulse," he said, "and I trust I am man enough not to let love blind my eyes to duty. I am afraid you must live to regret your decision, but I may yet find means to do you a service."

He turned and left her, and, calling to Sir John that he must depart without delay, he left the terrace with her uncle, telling him, Barbara had no doubt, of the ill-success of his interview.

What was the reason of her uncle's anxiety to force her into this marriage? Some power Lord Rosmore must surely hold over him. Sir John was afraid, and since he had not scrupled to suggest that she was in league with rebels, and in the same breath point out in how dangerous a position this rebellion placed her, there was no knowing to what lengths he might not go to achieve his ends.

Later in the day Sir John sent her a courteous message. He did not demand her presence amongst his guests, but he requested it. Her

continued absence had been much remarked and questioned, and there were many reasons why these comments should be silenced. Barbara answered that she would comply with his wishes; and that afternoon found her in the midst of a party on the terrace, listening to Mrs. Dearmer's coarse wit and endeavouring not to shudder at her laugh. It seemed quite evident that Sir John had not suggested to his guests that they should treat his niece in any special manner, and their conversation was less reticent than ever.

"You blush very easily," laughed Mrs. Dearmer, "but that pleases the men. I used to be the same, and devoutly wish I had not lost the art."

"Could you not regain it?" asked Barbara, and the question was followed by a burst of laughter, more at Mrs. Dearmer's expense than at her questioner's, perhaps.

"I'm afraid not. What we gain by experience must be lost in some other direction. It is merely a question which you prefer, the gain or the loss."

"My adorable madam, you go ill with mathematics," said one man, laughing. "Pray tell some tale that will again bring the colour to Mistress Lanison's cheek, for I vow she blushes most divinely."

"At least, sir, the cause can have little connection with heaven," said Barbara.

"Waste no words on him, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Dearmer. "He has been so long attached to the opposition that he has forgotten such a place as heaven exists. Tell me why you have deserted us lately. I held that it was indisposition, others declared it was temper, and others--can you guess what the others said?"

"Was it something very unkind?" asked Barbara.

She had walked away with Mrs. Dearmer and one or two others, amongst them a man named Heriot, to whom Barbara had hardly spoken, but whom she cordially disliked.

"They said you had a lover," said Mrs. Dearmer.

"It would have been kinder if they had given me a hundred, wouldn't it? That would, indeed, have been to praise me mightily and declare me irresistible."

"You will not find women so generous as that," laughed Heriot. "I thought there was a more subtle meaning in the declaration. In a hundred lovers there might be safety, but in one--ah! it is the persistency of one which reduces the citadel."

"I know many who might persist until they were leaning over their grave, and then not succeed," said Barbara, "and the citadel would not need to be very strongly guarded either."

"That should hasten your retreat, Mr. Heriot," said Mrs. Dearmer, and then she drew Barbara a little farther away. "Tell me, are they right? Is there a lover?"

"You may deny it if you are questioned," Barbara answered.

"I will. I would not betray such a secret for the world. Does he climb to your window when the terrace is empty and silent, or is there some secret door by which he comes and no one ever the wiser?"

"Is that what they say?" asked Barbara.

"Yes, and more," and Mrs. Dearmer put her finger to her lips to warn Barbara that others were close to them and might not keep her secret so faithfully as she would.

Barbara did not then understand all that was implied, but within a day or two she was conscious that her name was being flung from lip to lip with a laugh and a jest, that, no matter how innocent her words or her actions might be, an evil meaning was twisted out of them and applauded. Even her uncle laughed and seemed to agree when Heriot declared that a woman who was shy in her love affairs was always the most dangerous, and suggested that Mrs. Dearmer must look to her laurels now that Mistress Lanison had taken the field against her. To deny the insinuations, or to resent them, was only to make these men and women coarser, and increase the laughter and ribaldry, so Barbara decided to stay away again. This time, however, Sir John did not leave her alone. He sent a peremptory message demanding her presence.

"Tell Sir John I refuse to come, and if he would know my reason I will tell him here."

The servant hesitated.

"Sir John is out of temper, mistress. Would it not be better to--"

"You have my answer," said Barbara.

Many minutes had not elapsed before there were quick steps along the corridor, and Sir John burst into the room. The servant had spoken mildly when he said his master was out of temper, and Barbara's answer to his message had made him furious. He slammed the door and faced his niece.

"What is the meaning of this gross impertinence, girl? When I bid you do a thing you will do it; do you understand me? I have had more than enough of your vapours."

"And I, sir, more than enough of your guests."

"Do you dare to flout me?" he said with an oath.

"I dare anything when you forget what is my due from my guardian. For some purpose of your own you seem anxious to accuse me of being a rebel, and drag me into this ribald crew to have my ears assailed with all manner of indecencies, and to hear my own honour called in question."

"You're a fool, girl."

"Wise enough to determine that either Mrs. Dearmer and her companions must leave Aylingford, or I shall."

"Curse your impudence!" said Sir John, and before Barbara was aware of his intention, he had seized her wrist and commenced to drag her towards

the door, "Curse your impudence! We will see who is master at Aylingford. I shall have what guests I choose, and, by heaven, you shall treat them as I demand! You may flout Lord Rosmore, but I will see to it that you obey me."

"You hurt my wrist, sir."

"If it brings you to reason, it is perhaps the easiest way for you," he retorted. "Guests that are good enough for me shall be good enough for you."

"And if they say I am a scheming light o' love, you, sir, will no doubt find means to prove that they are right."

"Gad! your own prudery is doing that. Perhaps I might not have to make much inquiry to find that they had seen far more than I have. Much might go on in these rooms and the rest of the Abbey be none the wiser."

Barbara's free hand was suddenly raised to strike him, but she let it fall to her side again. He held her wrist the tighter, and laughed in her face.

"It is well for you that your daring stops short of that," he sneered.

"Last night I heard words spoken out of the darkness," said Barbara. "It is a sacred trust," said a voice; "God requite you if you fail in it. When she is of age give her that which is hers. She is free. Beware."

There was magic in the words. Sir John let go her wrist and started backwards with a curious, muffled sound in his throat. His face was suddenly white with fear, and his trembling hands were linked together, straining at each other. Barbara did not move, and in her motionless attitude and the fixed gaze in her eyes the man seemed to perceive an added terror.

"Who spoke them?" he stammered.

"A voice out of the darkness."

"They--they recall--what am I saying? Have your own way to-night; we shall both talk more calmly to-morrow."

"To-morrow cannot undo to-night, sir. I have decided to ask Lady Bolsover to let me visit her for a while. Two days ago I received a letter from her asking me to go to her again."

"I will see. We will talk of it to-morrow."

"There is naught to do, sir, but arrange for my journey to town."

It was almost as one suddenly stricken with a palsy that Sir John left the room and stumbled along the corridor. As he passed a man drew hastily back into the shadows, and then went light-footedly to Barbara's door. She had already locked it. He knocked.

"I have nothing more to say," said Barbara.

The man chanted a little stave in a low voice, and the door flew open.

"Martin!"

"You are in trouble, mistress, you need not tell me. Much I overheard, the rest I can guess. Lord Rosmore has departed. I met him on the road, at least he passed along the road, and I stood in the wood by the side to see him pass. Mr. Crosby is already busy in Dorsetshire, and I return to hear you are going to London."

"Yes, Martin."

"Dark hours, indeed," he said, "but there is the beam of light."

"It has gone out. Ah, Martin, you are a dreamer and look at the world through a veil of cloud, while I am a woman prone to trust too easily. We are easy to deceive, you and I."

"Yes, dreamer as I am, I have recognised much of the falsehood," said Martin.

"You like Mr. Gilbert Crosby?"

"One grows to like a man when you have fought by his side in an awkward corner."

"You would trust him?"

"Don't you?" asked Martin.

"He told me something of himself, but it was told to deceive. I found that in the ruins, just where he stumbled last night. He dropped it," and Barbara held out the brown mask which she had drawn from her dress.

Martin took it and turned it this way and that.

"He did not tell me that he was Galloping Hermit the highwayman," she said.

"Very strange," said Martin. "Another might have dropped it. Many men tramped that spot that evening. Sir John, Lord Rosmore, and a dozen others."

"Yes, and later, Mr. Fellowes," said Barbara. "He came with a despatch calling Lord Rosmore back into Dorsetshire."

"Might not Mr. Fellowes have dropped it?" Martin asked.

"He might. You may find many possibilities, but not probabilities."

"The famous mask," mused Fairley, "and you find it, mistress. For my part I have had a kindly thought for the wearer. There are tales about him which make him different from other highwaymen."

"Yes, Martin, I know, but I had almost--ah! you would not understand."

"I saw the beam of light, and it has now gone out, you say. This wisp of brown silk has extinguished it. But consider, might there not be some great purpose for a man taking to the road?"

"There might, Martin."

"I have heard, mistress, of a great noble who wore fool's motley that he might the better stand between his King and danger. I have heard of one who lay bound in chains for years that his friend might be saved. Men have died for others ever since this world was young."

"True, Martin."

"So Galloping Hermit may have some purpose which, did we but know it, would make him a hero to crown rather than a scoundrel to hang. His heart may beat honestly; the eyes which looked from these holes--"

"Were grey, Martin," and there was a catch in Barbara's voice which her companion was quick to notice.

"Courage, mistress, the beam of light is still shining. We must get rid of this."

"No, give it me. I may see him again and give it to him."

"And perhaps be mistaken after all," said Martin. "The highwayman has long since provided himself with another mask, so we may destroy this."

"No, Martin."

"Why keep so dangerous a trifle? See, it burns."

He took the candle and the mask to the hearth, and made sure that no tell-tale particle of the silk remained.

"Mistress, it is gone. Be wise, forget that you ever found it," and Martin trampled the ashes into dust.

CHAPTER XV

BARBARA LANISON IN TOWN

Londoners had crowded towards Tower Hill from an early hour, had seized every point of vantage, or looked down from high windows and roofs upon that little square of space which was kept clear and strongly guarded. To a few, perhaps, it was mere sight-seeing, an excitement, a means of passing a holiday; but to the majority it was a day of mourning, a time for silence and tears. Ill-fated rebellion was to be followed by the judicial murder of a popular idol. There had been tales current of this man's cowardice. He had crawled at the King's feet, begging slavishly for his life, had been willing to resign honour and liberty, his creed, and his very manhood so that he might escape the fate awaiting him. He had begged and petitioned for the intercession of every person who might have the power to say a word in his favour. He had shown himself a craven in every possible way, so it was said. This silent crowd, however, had no certain knowledge of the truth of these rumours; they might be, probably were, false reports to belittle him in the minds of the populace. What this waiting multitude remembered was that James, Duke of Monmouth, was a soldier of distinction and was doomed to die a

martyr for the Protestant faith.

Ten o'clock had sounded some time since, when there was a sudden movement in the crowd, a backward pressure by the ranks of guards, and a man, saluting as he passed, walked up that narrow, human lane to the little square and mounted the scaffold with a firm tread. A great hush fell, broken only by the sounds of sobbing. This man a coward! Every look, every action, gave the lie to such an accusation. Two Bishops stood by him and spoke to him, but their words were inaudible to the greater part of the crowd; and Ketch, the headsman, stood silently by the block, a man hated and execrated from the corridors of Whitehall to the filthiest purlieu of the town.

"I die a Protestant of the Church of England."

These words were clear enough, and against them the Bishops seemed to protest, but in what words the crowd could not hear, and only those close about the scaffold heard Monmouth's confession that he was sorry the rebellion had ever happened, since it had brought ruin on those who loved him. Then for a while he knelt in prayer, and said "Amen!" even to the Bishops' petition for a blessing upon the King, but it was grudgingly said, and after a pause. Why, indeed, should he pray for a King whose heart was of stone and who was incapable of showing compassion?

The silent crowd watched him with bated breath, dimly seeing through tears that he spoke to the executioner as he ran his finger along the edge of the axe, and then he laid his head upon the block. The axe fell once, twice, and again, yet there was not an end.

Then the silence was broken. A wild fury roared from every side.

"Fling Ketch to us!" cried the mob, pressing in upon the guards.

Two more blows were struck by the frightened, cursing headsman. The martyrdom was accomplished, but the angry and nauseated crowd had gone mad, and, but for the guards, would have worked their will on Ketch and perchance on others who had had part in this butchery. It was a raging crowd, ripe for anything, fiercely lusting to wreak its revenge on someone; but it was a crowd without a leader. Had a strong man at that moment assumed command of it, Monmouth's death might have brought success to the rebellion he had raised. Had a leader been found at that moment, a short hour might have seen the storming of Whitehall by the populace, and the King in the hands of his merciless enemies. No strong man arose, and James was left in peace to plan further vengeance on all those who had taken part in the rebellion, or shown pity to the vanquished.

Two days afterwards Barbara Lanison arrived in town, and received a most cordial welcome from her aunt, Lady Bolsover. She did not pester her niece for reasons why she had left Aylingford, it was only natural that any right-minded person would prefer London; nor did Barbara enlighten her. Before Barbara had been in the house an hour her aunt had given her a lively account of Monmouth's execution, and the horrors of it lost nothing in the telling.

"Surely you were not there!" Barbara exclaimed.

"No, I was not. I was tempted to venture, but I decided that it was

wiser to keep away. I should certainly have shown sympathy with the poor man, and to do so would be dangerous. I assure you, Barbara, all the news in town lately has concerned this rebellion, and--let me whisper it, for it comes near treason to say it--half London has been in two minds whether to cast in its lot with Monmouth or with the King. There is no denying the fact that the King is not popular, and, to put no fine point on it, has the temper and cruelty of the devil."

Lady Bolsover was genuinely pleased to have her niece with her again. After her own fashion she liked Barbara, and the presence of so attractive a person in her house was likely to re-establish the number and importance of her visitors, who, truth to tell, had not been so assiduous in their attentions since Barbara left her. The good lady was full of schemes for making the hours pass pleasantly, of course for her niece's sake, and, having assured herself that Barbara was still heart-whole, she was prepared to welcome to her house in St. James's all the eligible men she could entice there.

"I taught you a good deal last time, my dear; I'll see if I cannot get you married this."

Barbara smiled. She was anxious to please her aunt, and showed no desire to interfere with Lady Bolsover's schemes. It was such a relief to be free from the Abbey that Barbara experienced a reaction, and was inclined to enjoy herself. There were many things she would willingly forget. The brown mask had been reduced to ashes, but its destruction had not altered her opinion, nor had Martin succeeded in convincing her that she had not been grossly deceived. She had been threatened by Lord Rosmore, she had been insulted by her uncle and the men and women who were his companions, but, worst of all, she had been deceived by the man who had for so long occupied her thoughts and whom she had trusted.

The opportunity to forget her troubles in a round of pleasure was soon forthcoming. At a sign a dozen men were ready to throw themselves at her feet, and a score more were only restrained by the apparent hopelessness of their case. She was a queen and her courtiers were many; music and laughter were the atmosphere about her; her slightest wish immediately became a command, and she became the standard by which others were judged. Barbara was young and enjoyed it, as any young girl would. There were moments when her laughter and merry voice had no trace of trouble in them, when it would have been difficult to believe that a cloud had ever hung in her life; but there were other times when her eyes looked beyond the gay crowd by which she was surrounded, when her attention could not be fixed, and when her face had sadness in it. She was conscious of sorrow and tears under all the music and laughter.

Sometimes ugly rumours came, brought by a court gallant, or some young soldier who had returned from the West. Feversham had been called to London and loaded with honours, for "winning a battle in bed," as a wit said, and the brutal Colonel Kirke and his "lambs" were left in Somersetshire, free to commit any atrocities they pleased. If only half the stories were true, then had the West Country been turned into a hell, and Barbara hated the King who allowed such cruelty. She became a rebel at heart, and for the first time since she had found the mask in the ruins thought less harshly of Gilbert Crosby. There could be no reason to excuse his being a highwayman, but at least he had gone West to give what help he could to the suffering. How had he sped? The question set Barbara thinking, and, in spite of herself, Gilbert Crosby was in those thoughts all through a wakeful night.

Barbara saw nothing of Lord Rosmore, whether he was in London or not she did not hear; but once Sydney Fellowes came to her aunt's, and Barbara was glad to see him, although she hardly had a word with him. She was surrounded at the time, and Fellowes made no effort to secure her attention. He evidently considered himself in disgrace still, although Barbara had forgiven him, and had ceased to associate him with the evil which was at Aylingford Abbey.

It was not so easy to dissociate Judge Marriott from Aylingford. He came constantly to Lady Bolsover's, and on each occasion seemed to consider himself of more importance. So far as Barbara could judge he knew nothing of her reason for leaving the Abbey. He asked no questions, but delivered himself of many clumsy compliments framed to express his delight that the most charming creature on earth had brought sunshine again to town. It was impossible to make Judge Marriott understand that his attentions were not wanted, and Barbara, who had no desire to make an enemy of him, endured them as best she could. It was from him that she first heard that Judge Jeffreys was going to the West.

"He takes four other judges with him; I am one of them. Rebellion must be stamped out by the law. Jeffreys will undoubtedly come to great honour, and it will be strange if your humble servant, his most intimate friend, does not pick up some of the crumbs."

"Will the law be as cruel as the soldiers have been?" Barbara asked.

"A dangerous question, Mistress Lanison; I would not ask it of anyone else were I you. Remember the law deals out justice, not cruelty."

"Yet even justice may be done in a cruel fashion."

"The sufferer always thinks it cruel," said Marriott.

"And often those who look on," Barbara returned.

"I have no doubt that Jeffreys will do his duty and carry out the King's command. Why should you trouble your pretty head with such matters?"

"There are women who will suffer," she said. "It would be unwomanly not to think of them."

"And some man, some special man, who interests you, eh, Mistress Barbara?"

"Why should you think so?"

"Because I can read a woman like an open book," laughed Marriott. "Her thoughts line her face as the print does a page, while the looks in her eyes are like the notes on the margin."

"You read amiss if you think I am interested in a rebel awaiting judgment."

"I will confess that you are more difficult to understand than most women," said Marriott, "and it is not for want of study on my part. Do you remember what I said to you on the terrace at Aylingford?"

"Indeed, I have not treasured up all your words," she laughed.

"I swore that if there were a rebel you were interested in, he should go free at your pleading. I am in the humour to-night to listen very eagerly."

"There is no special person, Judge Marriott, but I would plead for them all," she answered. "Be merciful, for it is surely in your power. These people are ignorant countryfolk, led away by smooth tongues, and never counting the cost. They are men of the plough and the scythe, with little thought beyond these things, and they have wives and little children. Be merciful, Judge Marriott. Think of me, if you will, when the fate of a woman lies in your hands, and to the day of my death you shall hold a warm corner in my heart."

"I will, I swear it, and you--"

"Lady Bolsover is beckoning to me," said Barbara, and left him.

It was the day after this conversation with Judge Marriott that Martin Fairley came to see her for the second time since she had left Aylingford. To Barbara he seemed strangely out of place in town, the air he assumed of being exactly like other men ill-suited him, and he seemed at a loss without his bow and fiddle. His dress, too, was strictly conventional, and it appeared to affect the manner of his conversation. He was as a man in bonds.

"In London again, Martin!" Barbara exclaimed.

"To see that you are not in trouble, mistress," he answered, and it would have been difficult for a stranger to tell whether he was a lover, or a trusted servant of long standing; there was something of both in his manner.

"It is a long way to come."

"It is lonely at the Abbey," he said.

"Do you think you are safe there, Martin? Would it not be better to go away for a time?"

"Since you are not there, mistress, I lock the door of the tower at nights."

"But Sir John knows you are at the Abbey, and you cannot lock yourself in the tower all day," said Barbara.

"Your uncle is a little afraid of me. He is superstitious, and unless he has someone beside him to lend him courage, he will not molest me. Besides, there have been many festivals where my fiddle was wanted; I have not been much at the Abbey."

"You have been towards the West?" said Barbara eagerly.

"Yes."

"And you have heard--"

"Yes, mistress. I have heard how they suffer."

"Have you heard aught of Mr. Crosby?"

"Once or twice. I have seen one or two men who have said they escaped the soldiers by his help. He is doing all a man can do, I think, but for a fortnight I have heard nothing."

"Do you know that Judge Jeffreys goes West directly?"

"For the Assizes, yes. God help the prisoners! An unjust judge, mistress, a fawning servant of a brutal and revengeful King."

"Hush, Martin!" Barbara whispered. "It may be dangerous to speak the truth."

As if to prove the warning necessary, there came a knock at the door.

"There is a young woman asking to see you," said the servant. "She would give no name, but declared you would see her if I said Lenfield."

"Lenfield!" and her eyes met Martin's quickly. "Bring her up at once."

"Mistress, she may talk more freely if she is atone with you," said Martin. "There is a screen there, may I use it?"

Barbara nodded, and was alone when the woman entered the room.

"You are Mistress Lanison?" she asked, dropping a curtsy.

"Yes."

"My name is Harriet Payne, and I was a servant at Lenfield Manor when my master, Mr. Gilbert Crosby, escaped. Some of us, Golding the butler and myself amongst others, were arrested and taken to Dorchester."

"Yes, and then--"

"I cannot tell by what means, but my master procured my release and bid me go to my home, a little village in Dorsetshire. I cannot tell all the master has done, but I know that they have tried to catch him for a long time. He has been helping people to escape, they say. You don't know what it has been like in the West, mistress."

"Something of it, I know," said Barbara.

"One night Mr. Crosby came to my mother's cottage to see me," the girl went on. "He told me something of his danger, and said that if anything happened to him, or if I were in danger, I was to go to Aylingford Abbey and ask for you; if I could not see you I was to ask for Martin the fiddler."

"Well?"

"I was soon in trouble, mistress, and went to Aylingford. You were not there, nor was the fiddler. I was asked what I wanted, but I would not say. I suppose the servant went to ask his master, for Sir John Lanison himself came out to me."

"You did not tell him who you were?"

"I just said I was in trouble, and asked where I could find you. He laughed and said I wasn't the first young woman who had got into trouble, and he said--"

"You need not repeat it," said Barbara; "it was doubtless something insulting about me."

"Indeed it was, mistress, but he told me where I should find you."

"I do not know how I am to help you," said Barbara. "What do you want me to do?"

"It is not help for myself I want, but for Mr. Crosby. They had followed him to mother's cottage that night and waited. As he went out they caught him. He is a prisoner in Dorchester!"

CHAPTER XVI

PREPARED FOR SACRIFICE

Harriet Payne had made up her mind that she was the bearer of a lover's message; she expected her news to have a startling effect upon the woman she had travelled so far to see, but she was disappointed. There came no cry from suddenly parted lips, there was no sign of agitation about Barbara as her hands idly played with the folds of her gown for a few moments; it seemed doubtful whether she realised the full meaning of the message.

"What does your master expect me to do?" she asked, looking up after a pause.

Harriet Payne may have rehearsed a scene in which she would be called upon to soothe a stricken woman and speak comfort to a breaking heart. She had supposed that love was the same the world over, whether it went in silk brocade or coarse homespun. She had apt phrases ready to meet the expected, plenty of well-prepared sympathy to bestow, but she had no answer for this quiet, deliberate manner, and remained silent.

"Perhaps you can help me to a decision by telling me more," said Barbara. "You need not be afraid to speak."

"By Mr. Crosby's manner I thought you had some power, madam; I imagined that if you knew my master's position you would be able to help him."

"Who has accused Mr. Crosby of having anything to do with rebels?" Barbara asked.

"I cannot tell, but there is no doubt as to what he has done. It is well known that he has helped many of the rebels into safe hiding. There is another who is doing the same, a highwayman called 'Galloping Hermit.' You may have heard of him."

"Is he, too, in Dorsetshire?"

"The country people speak of him; now he is here, now there, but--"

"Do you think your master and this highwayman are the same person?" asked Barbara, and with more eagerness than she had asked her other questions.

"I have heard other people wonder whether they were, but I do not believe it; still, if Mr. Crosby is 'Galloping Hermit,' he is a man to be proud of. I would--"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Barbara; "but you can hardly expect me to take much interest in a highwayman."

"No, madam, of course not. I was not thinking of the highwayman, but of my master. It is on his account that I have journeyed to see you."

"It was good and honest of you to come," said Barbara. "I must think what I can do. Are you remaining in London?"

"I have a cousin in the city who is married to a mercer's assistant; I shall remain with her for a day or two," the girl answered.

"Come to-morrow about noon; I shall have decided something then."

"And if not you could help me to find this fiddler, perhaps?" said the girl.

When she had gone Martin came from behind the screen, and Barbara looked at him, her eyes full of questions.

"Yes, mistress, I fear her story is true. What she says of Mr. Crosby's doings is correct, also it is a fact that Galloping Hermit has been in Dorsetshire."

"You have seen him?"

"I have heard of him."

"I must try and help him though he is a highwayman," said Barbara. "There can be no longer any doubt, Martin, that the two are one."

"Yet you will help him? How?"

"There is a way, a hard way, and I am not yet certain what it may mean to me, but it shall be done; yes, it shall be done."

As she turned to a window and looked down into the square, Martin saw that there were tears in her eyes.

"Tell me, mistress. You have told me your troubles before now, and it has not been always in vain."

"I will tell you later, Martin."

"Perhaps it will be too late then," he answered. "Count the cost, mistress; is a highwayman worth the price?"

"That girl was right," said Barbara, turning a glowing face to Martin. There were tears in her eyes, but they had not fallen. "She was right; even a highwayman is a man to be proud of when he helps the suffering

from their brutal persecutors, as this Galloping Hermit is doing. I would sacrifice much even for a highwayman, and when he is Gilbert Crosby, too--ah! Martin, I have had dreams, pleasant dreams. I am awake now, they are only a memory, but, if need be, I will pay for them to the uttermost farthing."

"You will not tell me the price?"

"When I know it, and that will be to-morrow. Come to-morrow afternoon, Martin, unless you are going back to Aylingford at once."

"I shall come," he answered; but listen, mistress, there are more ways than one of helping Gilbert Crosby. Do not pay too high a price. I wish you would tell me with whom you are bargaining."

"To-morrow, Martin, and until then--"

"You would be alone," said Martin quietly, and then his figure suddenly stiffened, his hands were clenched until the muscles in them stood out like whipcord, and his speech was quick and fierce. "Understand, mistress, no word you speak, no promise you may be compelled to give, binds me. No matter how fettered you may be, I am free to do as I will, and God help the man who seeks to work you evil!"

Barbara had seen him in many moods, known him as dreamer, jester, counsellor, and philosopher, always with an air of unreality in what he did and said, always "Mad Martin," yet with strange wisdom and cunning in his madness at times. In this mood she had never seen him before. His face, indeed, the whole man, was changed. Madness must have got the upper hand entirely for a moment.

"Why, Martin, you--"

But he had gone. She had been too astonished to speak at once, and the door had closed before she could finish her sentence. The mood seemed to pass quickly, too, for looking from the window, Barbara saw him cross the square, the familiar figure, in spite of the conventional garments which he wore in town and which suited him so ill. He could never be the real Martin Fairley away from that tower in the ruins at Aylingford, Barbara thought.

Not without reason was Fairley's warning, for if a woman will make a sacrifice she seldom counts the full cost. She must give generously, with both hands wide open, or not at all. Barbara did not think of the highwayman, but of Gilbert Crosby, and for him she was determined to sacrifice herself. Dreams she had had, dreams which ended in happiness; now such an ending was impossible, but the man who had inspired those dreams was still worthy the sacrifice. It was a woman's argument, absolutely conclusive to a woman. She had the power to help, and she meant to use that power.

There was a brilliant company that night at Lady Bolsover's, and probably Barbara Lanison had never appeared more fascinating. She had been very careful to wear what became her best; she was bent on conquest, and so that she conquered fully and completely she recked little how. Her beauty and her ready wit quickly gathered a crowd about her, and not one of her enthusiastic admirers guessed that under her merry speech and laughter was an anxious, sorrowful heart and a wealth of restrained tears. One or two, whose love and hope had made their

understanding of her keener, may have noticed that her eyes were sharp to mark each new guest who entered the room. There was someone she expected and for whom she was waiting. One man beside her looked at her quickly when Sydney Fellowes entered the room, possibly he had reason to suppose that Fellowes loved her and might prove no mean rival, but it seemed evident that he was not the man expected to-night. Sydney Fellowes bowed over her hand presently, murmured some conventional phrase, and passed on; but from a corner, and unobserved, he watched her. When she passed into another room he followed her at a distance, and took note of every man and woman with whom she talked. He saw that she was restless, for who was there who could understand her moods better than he did? How often had he sat beside her, learning to read her thoughts in the blue eyes which were more beautiful than any other eyes in the world.

She was standing in the doorway between two rooms when he saw her start suddenly, and, following the direction of her eyes, he saw Sir John Lanison. He had just entered the room, and was explaining his presence to his sister, Lady Bolsover, who was evidently surprised to see him. He turned to greet several acquaintances, and then, seeing his niece, advanced towards her. He looked at her a little curiously, realising for the first time, perhaps, how beautiful she was. Barbara's face hardened for a moment, but the next instant she smiled. This man was her enemy, all the more dangerous because he was also her guardian, but it would be wise to keep him in ignorance of how fully she understood him.

"Your arrival is unexpected, sir."

"Yet not altogether unwelcome, I trust," said Sir John, treating her with studied courtliness, a manner he could use to perfection. "I was obliged to come to town, and could not refrain from coming to see you. You may guess why, perchance?"

"Has it to do with a young person in trouble?" asked Barbara.

Sir John looked puzzled for a moment. "Oh, you mean that girl who came to the Abbey. Did she really travel all the way to London to see you? I am surprised. She did not tell me her story, but I told her where you were to be found, never supposing that she would come to you."

"She came, and I have heard her story," said Barbara.

"It bears a close relationship to many another young woman's story, I wager," said Sir John with a smile. "Truly, I was not much impressed with her. If I may be allowed to speak a word of warning, I should say beware of her. She could lie easily, I fancy, with never a blush or the flicker of an eyelid to betray her. No, it was not about her I wished to see you."

"Then, sir, I cannot guess," said Barbara.

"I wished to apologise," said Sir John. "As I grow older my ill temper gains on me, I fear. Thwarted, I am senseless enough at times to become like a bullying schoolboy, and I say the first outrageous things which come to my tongue--conduct worthy only of a harridan. It was so that night at Aylingford. You were entirely right, I was entirely wrong. Forgive me, Barbara."

"I forgive, yes, but you must not expect me to forget so readily," she

answered. "Forgetfulness can only come with time, Sir John, you must understand that."

"Perfectly. I do not expect to enjoy the luxury of being ill-tempered without having to pay the price for it. I only ask that you may not make the price too heavy. When you choose to return to the Abbey you shall find a welcome."

Sir John did not wait for any answer, nor had Barbara the opportunity of thinking over what he had said just then, for the moment her uncle left her another claimed her attention.

Still Sydney Fellowes watched her. It was evidently not her uncle for whom she had been waiting. It seemed as evident that she was doomed to disappointment to-night. Fellowes was one of the last to leave, and it was impossible that any other guest could arrive now.

Barbara dismissed her maid quickly, almost impatiently, that night. She wanted to be alone. She expected to have done so much this evening, expected that she would have known her fate by now. She had faced the worst, she was prepared to pay the price, whatever it might be, always with a hope that it would not be as bad as she anticipated. Everything was yet to do, the uncertainty was still hers; the delay gave her lonely hours in which to realise all that this sacrifice might involve, and involuntarily she shrank from it. She was not less resolved, however, and there was an added incentive in the fact that the difficulties in her way were greater than she had expected. Sir John's arrival could have only one meaning; he must know, or had guessed, the real reason of Harriet Payne's coming to the Abbey, and had immediately travelled to town to ensure that, if he could possibly prevent it, no help should be given to Gilbert Crosby. His apology made no impression upon her, and she believed him capable of committing any villainy to get his own way. Surely, after what had happened at Aylingford, she had ample reason for her opinion. How was she to meet his designs and defeat them? There was only one way, the full sacrifice of herself. She looked critically at herself in the mirror, dashed the tears from her eyes, and smiled, touched her hair that the curls might fall most becomingly, and turned her head this way and that, coquetting with her own reflection.

"Can I smile so winningly that a man will think possession of me cheaply bought at any price?" she murmured. "I think so, I believe so. I will make the bargain. Whatever beauty I have shall be staked against your villainy, Sir John; and I think the woman will win."

She was strong in her determination, yet she sobbed herself to sleep.

Not having been a frequent visitor at Aylingford Abbey in recent years, Lady Bolsover knew nothing about the company so constantly assembled there, nothing about her brother's pursuits and interests. That he must have fallen behind the times and become uninteresting, she took for granted; nothing else was to be expected of one who resided constantly in the country, she argued; yet she admitted to herself that Sir John looked a fine gentleman as he passed amongst her guests, and was rather surprised to find how full he was of town graces. After all, he was the owner of Aylingford, a circumstance which marked him as a man of importance, and some of the scandal which had been attached to his name as a younger man had not died out. She heard one woman inquire who he was, and, receiving an answer, say quickly, "_the_ Sir John Lanison, do you mean?" The interest displayed rather pleased Lady Bolsover, for

surely fame, however obtained, was preferable to insignificance and nonentity. She therefore received her brother very graciously when he called on the following morning, and felt very contented that he should have chanced last night upon such a brilliant evening, and must realise how big a position his sister filled in the social world of London. If she had been inclined to despise him for burying himself at Aylingford, she was conscious that he had never looked upon her as a very important person.

Sir John was full of flattery this morning. He regretted that his niece had a headache, but it enabled him to have his sister to himself.

"A few days here, amongst men and women of wit and standing, would cure you of your absurd love of the country," said Lady Bolsover.

"At least it has done wonders for my niece," he answered.

"Surely you have not come to drag her back into exile!"

Sir John smiled. It was evident that Barbara had not entered into an explanation of her reasons for leaving the Abbey.

"No, I think she is in very good hands for the present. She appears to have many admirers."

"Can you wonder at it? She is as pretty as a picture, and when such a picture has an exceedingly heavy golden frame--"

"My dear Peggy, you hit the centre of the target with the first shaft. For most of these admirers the frame is the chief attraction. In this fact arises the difficulty of my guardianship."

"Barbara has spirit; you must not draw the rein too tightly or she will kick over the traces," said Lady Bolsover.

"Exactly, and show herself a true Lanison," said Sir John. "I propose to let the reins hang very loosely indeed. Let her have her own way. She will find it so uninteresting not to meet with any opposition that she will probably end in doing exactly as I wish."

"And to whom have you decided to marry her?"

Sir John held up his hand with his fingers apart.

"There are at least five to choose from," he said.

"All country bumpkins who affect outrageous clothes and delight in muddy boots?" inquired his sister.

"On the contrary, they are all lovers of the town, whole-heartedly for King James, and with those convenient morals which go so far to make a gallant gentleman."

"You pique my curiosity."

"Then I do you a service, and would not spoil it by satisfying that curiosity," said Sir John. "Watch Barbara, and you may see my little comedy in the playing, for some of these five are not infrequently your guests."

Lady Bolsover found her brother entertaining, and it was late in the afternoon when he spoke of taking his leave.

"I will let Barbara know; she will like to see you before you go."

A servant was sent to inform Mistress Lanison of her uncle's departure, and in a few minutes he returned to say that Mistress Lanison was out.

"Out! Where?"

"I have made inquiries, my lady, but no one seems to know," said the servant. "Madam went out with her maid quite early this morning, but returned shortly afterwards. A young person who came to see her yesterday came again to-day, just after noon, and it seems that Mistress Lanison went out with her. The maid left the house barely an hour ago."

Lady Bolsover looked at her brother, who glanced swiftly at the servant. Lady Bolsover understood, and told the servant to go.

"What can have happened?" she said as the door was closed.

"Nothing serious, I warrant, my dear Peggy. Like all you women, Barbara is enjoying some harmless intrigue. Do you mind that day at Aylingford when I horsewhipped your first admirer? How old were you then?"

"But Barbara is--"

"Young," said Sir John, "and to indulge a frolic has taken advantage of the loose rein. You will find her in her room presently, with her head still aching, but slightly better, and to-night she will be as radiant as a young Diana."

"I trust so."

"Take my word for it. Long residence in the country has not made me forget that I once understood women very well." And with a smile Sir John departed.

CHAPTER XVII

BARBARA'S SELF-SACRIFICE

There were few coaches and lackeys in the square when Sydney Fellowes left Lady Bolsover's. Hastily taking leave in the hall of an acquaintance who seemed inclined to bear him company, he hurried away, too much absorbed in his thoughts to think of the dangers of the streets for a lonely man at that hour of the night. He went quickly to Pall Mall, and entered a coffee-house there. A man at once rose from a corner to attract his attention. It was Martin Fairley.

"She evidently expected someone to-night," said Fellowes in a low tone as they sat down together, "but I cannot guess who, nor whether it was man or woman. Of one thing I am certain, whoever she expected, Mistress Lanison was disappointed."

"Who was there?"

"Sir John Lanison for one, Martin. No, his niece did not expect him, nor Lady Bolsover either. His arrival was a surprise to both of them."

"And to me," Martin answered; "but it is bad news. What brings him from Aylingford? Can Rosmore be in town?"

"No, that is impossible," returned Fellowes. "He is busy with preparations for the assizes, and is in command of the military force placed at the disposal of Judge Jeffreys. For the present Rosmore is tied to the West. I would he might find a speedy grave there."

"Sir John comes like an ill-omened bird; I wish I knew his reason," said Martin thoughtfully. "Did he speak with his niece?"

"A few words only, and there was the courtesy as of strangers between them. I could not hear what was said, but it was nothing that had any special interest for Mistress Lanison. Her expression did not change."

"Do you imagine you can read her so easily?"

"Ah, Martin, I know; there is no imagination in it. Were I cunning with a brush and colour, I could paint you a thousand of her expressions and tell you the thoughts which lay behind them all. I am a lover, remember, with all a lover's quick perception, although the lady I worship thinks no more of me than of the soiled glove she casts aside."

Martin looked at him for a moment in silence, and then laid his hand on his arm.

"Soiled gloves go in pairs, Master Fellowes."

"You mean--"

"There is small difference sometimes between a lover and a madman. Had I my fiddle with me I might play to you all that I mean."

Fellowes drummed with his fingers on the little table before him for a moment, and then seemed to shake himself out of a dream.

"There must be too few women in the world, Martin, when the desires of so many men are for one. To-morrow--what must be done to-morrow?"

"I shall see her to-morrow afternoon; until then I cannot tell what is to be done. A message will find you at your lodging?"

"Yes, I shall wait. If I do not hear, I shall make some excuse for being at Lady Bolsover's again in the evening."

Outside the coffee-house they separated. Where Martin went at nights Fellowes did not know, nor did he inquire. Fairley could find him, if necessary, and that was enough.

Neither did Barbara know where Martin lived, or she would surely have sent him a message next day, for long before noon she had made up her mind to act without delay.

The coming of Sir John was as ill-omened to her as it was to Martin. In some manner, she was convinced, his presence in London nearly concerned her, and much might depend on her promptness in carrying out the resolution she had made. So she awoke with a convenient headache, and had the news conveyed to her aunt. Then, assured that she would be left undisturbed, she dressed very carefully, anxious to look her best, and even practised her most winning smiles before her mirror. Her maid, who could be trusted and was a child of intrigue by nature, loyally assisted her mistress, and they were able to leave the house together without hindrance. Calling a coach, they were driven to the Temple, where Judge Marriott had his lodging. Barbara had determined to appeal to him. If he would, he certainly could save Gilbert Crosby, and, if she hoped so to entreat him that the reward he asked for his help should not be too heavy, she was prepared to pay whatever price he demanded. In imagination she saw herself his wife, and though she shuddered at the thought she never contemplated stopping the coach and going back to St. James's Square, her mission unfulfilled.

"Judge Marriott has left London," said the servant when Barbara inquired for him.

"When does he return?"

The servant did not know. It seemed evident that his general instructions were to be reticent concerning his master's going and coming.

"I must see him without delay on a matter of the gravest importance--the gravest importance to him," said Barbara, and she was surely speaking nothing but the truth, for the easy winning of her must be of great moment to any man. "Can you tell me where I shall find him? Has he gone to Aylingford Abbey?"

The man thought not, but his imagination did not appear to help him further than that.

"It is most important," repeated Barbara, and in her hand was a golden bribe.

"I ought not to give any information," said the man, "but you say it is important to my master. He has set out for Dorchester to deal with some of the rebel prisoners there."

"You are sure he goes first to Dorchester?"

"Quite certain, madam."

Barbara was deeply thoughtful as the coach drove back to St. James's Square. An unforeseen obstacle was placed in the way of her self-sacrifice, an obstacle so great that it did not seem possible to overcome it. Was Judge Marriott's absence of her uncle's contriving? It did not seem probable, but she was in the mood to connect him with all disaster, and when, on returning to the house, she learnt that Sir John was there with Lady Bolsover, her suspicions seemed confirmed. Barbara was the more determined to defeat his schemes. She would certainly have sent to Martin had she known where to find him, but as it was she was obliged to act for herself.

Harriet Payne came at noon, with a sad and gloomy countenance.

"What is it?" Barbara asked. "Is there further and worse news?"

"No, nothing further."

"Your face has a wealth of trouble in it."

"Indeed, madam, and is it any wonder?" the girl asked. "I am so helpless, and I could wish to be so strong. Every hour counts, and what can I do?"

"You have travelled far to ask my help, that is something."

"Yes, madam; but yesterday you gave me little hope, and even that little is gone. In this matter you are as helpless as I am."

Barbara laughed, a little hardly perhaps, remembering in which direction her power lay.

"Had I been powerless, do you suppose your master would have sent you to me? I have had to decide whether I shall use that power."

"And you will use it?"

"I have already tried to do so this morning, and failed."

"Here? In London?"

"Yes. In which direction did you imagine my power lay?"

"I could not tell, but I thought--I thought it must be in Dorchester where my master is a prisoner. Madam, there are powerful men in the West who may be bribed, who are being bribed every day. I thought it was with them you would have to deal."

"The man I hoped to see in London is gone to the West," said Barbara.

"Then--"

"Yes, I intend to follow him, and at once. In this enterprise you will be of more service to me than my own maid. Will you go with me?"

"Gladly, madam," and the girl's face brightened at once. "I have made the journey to London more than once, and know that at the house where the coach stops a carriage and horses can be procured."

"You are beginning to make yourself useful at once," Barbara returned. "Wait here for me. I have to give my maid instructions, and then we will start without delay."

Barbara told her maid to be on the watch for Martin Fairley, and to tell him that she had gone to Dorchester.

"He will understand why," she said; "and as I shall not want you with me, and yet do not want you to be questioned, you had better return to the Abbey as soon as you have seen Martin. Be sure and do not let anyone hear you give the message."

The girl had friends in London, and asked if she might spend a day or

two with them before returning to Aylingford.

"It will fit my plan excellently," Barbara answered. "Leave this house as soon as you possibly can after seeing Martin, and if your friends will have you, stay with them until I send for you. You will be well out of the way of questions."

"No questions would make me betray you," said the girl.

"I know, but your face is a tell-tale one," Barbara answered. "You have the virtue of not being able to lie easily."

The girl was honest, and it was no fault of hers that she failed to deliver her message to Martin Fairley. She saw him come to the house, and hurried down to him, meaning to catch him in the square and speak to him where none could overhear her, and so carry out her mistress's instructions to the letter. But Fairley had departed quickly, and was nowhere to be seen. For some time she waited for his return, and when he did not come, thought it best to fulfil the other part of her instructions and leave the house at once.

The servants at Lady Bolsover's knew nothing of Martin Fairley, not even his name. He had twice been admitted to see Mistress Lanison, but, for all the servants knew, he was some tradesman with whom she had dealings. Many such came to Lady Bolsover's. As Martin came to the door that day one servant called to another to fetch a coach for Sir John Lanison, and, hearing that Sir John was in the house, Martin departed quickly, saying that he would come at a more convenient hour. He did not want Sir John to know that he was in London, but he was curious to know upon what mission Sir John had come to town. Here was an opportunity to satisfy his curiosity which he had not counted upon, and he turned swiftly into the first alley which presented itself, and waited. He was so intent on watching for Sir John that he failed to notice Barbara's maid, who on her side was not anxious to attract too much attention either from those who might be at the windows of the house or from idlers in the square.

Fairley had to wait nearly an hour, and then Sir John came. He took no notice of the coach, had no doubt given the servants some instructions concerning it, but walked leisurely across the square with the air of a man at peace with himself and all the world. Whatever plot might be on foot, it had received no check, and Fairley argued the worst from that handsome, smiling face.

"He is delighted with some great villainy," he said to himself as he came from his hiding-place and followed him.

Sir John Lanison was conscious that some attention was paid to him as he passed. He was a fine gentleman, and retained a little of that old-fashioned grace which had been the admiration of the town a couple of decades ago, when foolish women had looked upon him almost as a hero of romance, and men had thought twice before raising the anger of so accomplished a swordsman. A remembrance of former triumphs, with perhaps a little sigh to keep it company, came to him as he went towards the Haymarket, but certainly no thought of Martin Fairley was in his mind. His destination was a hostelry where he was evidently known, and there was a rush to do his bidding. He was travelling to Aylingford to-morrow, and must needs have the best coach and horses procurable. He was going alone; yes, and would start at an early hour. His orders were received with bows and much obsequiousness.

"Tell me, landlord, have you sent out a coach in that direction to-day?"

"Not to Aylingford, sir."

"But in that direction. The road does not only lead to the Abbey."

"Why, yes, sir; a coach started for the West early this afternoon," was the answer.

"In these days the traffic sets more this way," said Sir John. "What kind of passengers were they?"

"Two women; one closely veiled, but if her face were equal to her figure, to hide it was cheating mortals out of a pleasure. The other was a maid, a pert little baggage who ordered us about somewhat."

"Going to Exeter?"

"No, to Dorchester."

Sir John nodded, and the smile of satisfaction seemed permanent.

"You observe closely, landlord. I warrant you could describe the mistress's clothing for all you were so ordered about by the maid."

The landlord grinned, and proved his observation by a somewhat close description.

"I get asked such questions sometimes," he said, "when a mistress runs away, or a rebel makes hastily for the sea-coast and safety. It is well to be observant."

Sir John laughed, and having demanded that the post-boys supplied to-morrow should not be of the sort who see a highwayman in every broken tree trunk by the wayside, he departed.

The conversation had been overheard by a crowd of loafers in the adjoining room, who had suspended their drinking to watch this fine gentleman to whom the landlord was so attentive. Then the clatter and conversation began again, and only one man was interested enough to seek further information. He had only entered a few moments ago; now he approached the landlord.

"I heard your description just now; it interested me."

The landlord looked at Fairley from head to foot, and then brought his eyes to bear keenly on his face.

"You are not known to me."

"But I am to the lady, unless I mistake not. You spoke of runaway mistresses, and truly I think that shot at a venture found its mark."

"You would follow her?"

"If your answer to a question or two satisfies me, I will ride without delay the best horse you have."

The questions were asked, and Martin was so satisfied that he was impatient to be gone.

"So that I am well paid it's no odds to me," said the landlord. "I made the lady no promise, and she's not the first who has grown tired of her husband, nor will she be the last."

"She may thank you for giving me the information," Fairley answered. "Ink and paper quickly, landlord; I must write a letter before I go."

By the time the horse was ready the letter was written.

"Find a messenger for this, landlord, and see that it is delivered without delay. There is payment for the messenger; tell him he will receive a like sum from the gentleman to whom this is addressed."

There was a certain awkwardness about Martin Fairley as he rode out of the yard, enough to show that he was not so accomplished a horseman as some men; yet he had improved in his riding since he had borne Gilbert Crosby company from "The Jolly Farmers" that night.

The letter was delivered to Sydney Fellowes before Fairley had gone many miles upon his journey.

"I believe Mistress Lanison is on her way to Dorchester, and I am following," Fellowes read. "What plan is in her mind I cannot tell, but since it seems to give Sir John much satisfaction, I argue that some trap lies in the way. It is possible that I may be mistaken, so will you go to Lady Bolsover's to-night and make sure that Mistress Lanison has gone. If she has, and you can come, make all haste to Dorchester. There is a little tavern called 'The Anchor' in West Street. No one of consequence would use it, so you shall find word of me there."

Not many hours later Sydney Fellowes was also riding towards the West.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE JOURNEY TO DORCHESTER

There was an atmosphere of unrest about the inn at Witley this evening. An hour ago a coach had arrived, and the best rooms were in requisition for the travellers, a lady and her maid. It was whispered amongst the loungers in the common room that she was a great lady, in spite of the fact that she travelled in a hired coach, but this idea was perhaps due to the fact that the maid was imperious, and demanded attention in a manner that carried weight. The servant of an ordinary person would hardly have been so dictatorial.

Even before the arrival of the coach the inn had been far more alive than usual, for a company of troopers had galloped up to it late in the afternoon making inquiry concerning a fugitive. He might be alone, but probably had a companion with him. Both men were minutely described, and it would seem that the capture of the companion would be likely to give the greater satisfaction.

No one at the inn had either seen or heard anything of them, and the troop had given up the pursuit. After refreshment, and a noisy halt of half an hour, the men had returned by the way they had come, leaving two of their company behind. These two were in the common room when the coach arrived, and, like everyone else in the house, were mightily interested in the lady and her maid. When the bustle had subsided a little they called for more ale and settled themselves comfortably in a corner.

"Well, for my part I'm not sorry the fellow got away," said one man, stretching out his legs easily. "We've enough prisoners to make examples of already."

"One more or less makes no matter," was the answer, "but it's wonderful how many have managed to slip through our fingers by the help of this fellow Crosby. I'd give something to lay him by the heels."

"Aye, that would mean gold enough in our pockets to jingle."

"And we shall get him presently," the other went on. "He is known to many of us now that he does not always hide himself behind the brown mask."

"If there were no money in it, I wouldn't raise a hand against him," said his companion, "for I've a sneaking fondness for the fellow. He's got courage and brains, and they've got the better of us up to now. Mark me, we shan't take him easily when the opportunity does offer. He'll make a corpse of one or two of us in the doing it."

"More guineas for those who are left," was the answer. "The other affair trots nicely," and he winked slowly over the tilted edge of his tankard.

"Wait!" said the other. "The netting of such fish may be sport enough, but there are handsome fish which are the devil to handle, and the taste of them is poison. Hist!"

His companion turned quickly at the warning, and through the open door saw the maid, who attended the great lady, in the passage without. She inquired for the landlord, who came quickly, and at the same time the trooper got up and crossed the room, giving no explanation to his companion.

"Must we start early to reach Dorchester to-morrow?" the maid inquired of the landlord.

"Yes, very early. The roads--"

"The roads are good, mistress," volunteered the trooper. "I have ridden over them to-day."

"You may be able to tell me better than the landlord, then," said the girl, and for some minutes they talked in a low tone as they stood in the doorway of the inn.

"A fine night, mistress," said the man as the girl was about to leave him. "With the moon up like this, lovers should be abroad. It's but a hundred yards to the open fields; will you come?"

"With you!" exclaimed the girl scornfully, looking him up slowly from

his boots to his eyes.

"Why not?" The maid's eyes were attractive, her figure was neat, and the man had sufficient ale in him to make him bold. For an instant they looked at each other; then the girl laughed derisively.

"When the master grows tired, the man may prove useful, and the man has a fancy for sampling the wares forthwith," said the trooper as he caught hold of the girl and would have kissed her. Perhaps he did not expect any great resistance, and was unprepared, but at any rate she slipped from his embrace, dealing him a resounding box upon the ears as she did so.

"You shall be punished further before many hours are over," said the girl as she ran lightly up the stairs.

The man growled an oath as he stood with his hand to his assaulted ear.

"Did I not say that some were the devil to handle?" remarked his companion, who had come to the common-room door, and was smiling grimly.

"I grant she takes first trick, and with a heavy hand for so small a person, but the game is only commencing. One more draught of ale to drink success to the end of it, and then to horse."

As the troopers rode out of Witley presently a horseman drew back into the shadow of some trees by the roadside to let them pass.

"The remaining two," he murmured. "That's well; they have given up the pursuit," and he turned and went at a brisk canter across country.

The maid said nothing about the trooper to her mistress; she only told her that an early start would have to be made.

"Very well, Harriet, I shall want nothing more to-night, and will put myself to bed."

But Barbara Lanison was in no haste to seek sleep. She was tired, bodily tired, but mentally she was wakeful. There were some hours still before she could reach Dorchester, and many more hours might elapse before she could get speech with Judge Marriott. Having determined to make the sacrifice, she was eager that it should be over and done with, that she should know the full extent of the sacrifice. And perhaps, at the back of her mind, there was a little fear of herself. The question would arise, again and again, no matter how she tried to suppress it, was she justified in acting as she intended to do? Who was this man for whom she was prepared to give so much? A notorious highwayman, upon whose head there was a price. Yes, it was true, but he was also Gilbert Crosby, the man who had taken possession of her thoughts since the first moment she had seen him, the man who had sheltered and helped the peasantry fleeing from an inhuman persecution, and who must now pay for his courage with his life unless she pleaded for him. Was she justified? The question sounded in her ears when she fell asleep; she heard it when she awoke next morning. Yes, and mentally she flung back the answer, yes, for to her Gilbert Crosby was something more than a brave man, and was dear to her in spite of everything. He was the man who had set an ideal in her heart, he was the man she loved. Hardly to herself would she admit it, but it was love that sent her to the West.

It was still early when the coach rolled out of Witley, but it was not early enough, nor was the pace fast enough, to satisfy Barbara. She became suddenly fearful of pursuit which might stop her from reaching Dorchester. She began to dread some breakdown which might delay her and cause her to arrive too late.

"Shall we be in time?" she asked more than once, turning to Harriet Payne.

"Yes, madam, you need have no fear. The assizes have not yet begun in Dorchester."

Pursuit was behind, but it was the pursuit of a friend. Whether it was the fault of the horseman or his mounts, disaster rode with Martin Fairley. To begin with, his horse cast a shoe, and by the time a smith was found and his work done, an hour had been wasted. Before the end of the first stage the horse collapsed; there was considerable difficulty in getting a remount, and the animal procured was a sorry beast for pace. Martin fretted at the delay, and cursed the adverse fates which so hindered him. Once he was within three miles of the coach, and then his horse went dead lame. Hours were lost before he could get another horse and resume the journey, and during those hours much might have happened.

The coach had left only an hour when he arrived at the inn at Witley.

"Yes, the travellers were a lady and her maid," the landlord told him.

"Going to Dorchester?" Martin asked.

"Yes. They started early."

"Has anyone inquired for them?"

"No."

"Some breakfast, landlord--ale and bread and cheese will do--and a horse at once."

"Yes, sir."

"And for heaven's sake give me a horse with four sound legs and with wind enough in its bellows to stand a gallop."

Fairley was soon in the saddle again, and this time with a better horse under him. His spirits rose as the miles were left rapidly behind, and as he turned each bend in the road he looked eagerly for a dust cloud before him proclaiming that his pursuit was nearly at an end.

Barbara sat silently in the corner of the carriage, Harriet Payne sat upright, looking from the window. It was Harriet who first noticed that the post-boy was suddenly startled, and that, in looking back, he had almost allowed the horses to swerve from the roadway.

"What is it?" she called from the window, as she looked back along the road they had come.

The post-boy pointed with his whip. Barbara looked hastily from the other window. There was much dust from their own wheels, but, beyond, there was another cloud surrounding and half concealing a horseman who

was fast overtaking them.

"Looks like a highwayman," said the post-boy.

"Better a highwayman than some others who might have followed us," said Barbara, leaning back in her corner again. "Tell the boy to go on quietly, Harriet. This may be a very worthy gentleman who has need of haste."

A few minutes later the horseman galloped up to the window.

"Martin! You!" Barbara exclaimed.

"Had I not been delayed upon the journey I should have caught you before this. I wish I had."

"Why, Martin? Do you suppose I am to be turned from my purpose?"

Fairley rode beside the open window, and Barbara leaned forward to talk with him.

"I do not know your purpose," he said, "but I fear a trap has been set for you."

"A trap!" Harriet exclaimed.

"Why do you think so, Martin?" Barbara asked.

Fairley told her how he had followed Sir John to the hostelry in the Haymarket.

"You see, mistress, he knew where you would hire. He went direct to this place and made his inquiries as though he knew beforehand what answers he would receive. His smile was so self-satisfied that I scented danger."

"And you see we are safe, nothing has happened."

"Not yet," was the answer. "There is presently a by-road I know of, and by your leave we will take it."

Barbara felt a little quick tug at her sleeve, and turned to Harriet.

"Do not give him leave. I do not trust him," whispered the girl.

"Why not?"

"Some who seem to be your friends are no friends to Mr. Crosby."

"This is no friend to be afraid of," laughed Barbara. "Were you not told to seek a fiddler at Aylingford if you failed to find me? This is he!"

"A fiddler!" Harriet exclaimed. She had evidently not expected the fiddler to be a man of this sort, and was not satisfied.

Barbara turned to the window again. "Tell me what you fear, Martin. I must not be hindered in reaching Dorchester, but take this by-road you talk of if you think it safer."

"It will be a wise precaution, and will not delay us long upon the journey." He rode forward a little, and spoke to the post-boy.

"He will delay us, I know he will," said Harriet. "I have no faith in him, and it may just make the difference in saving my master."

"Don't be foolish, girl. Your master has no better friend in the world."

"I cannot help it, but I do not believe it," sobbed the girl.

"You have told me the assizes have not begun in Dorchester. We shall not be too late."

"But they have hanged and shot men without waiting for a trial. I know; I have seen them. They hate my master, and were they to learn you were hurrying to his rescue, they would kill him before you came."

"I am doing my best," said Barbara.

"Keep to the high road, mistress," urged the girl.

Barbara turned from her impatiently, and Martin came back to the window.

"What is your purpose when you arrive in Dorchester?" he asked.

"I cannot tell you."

Martin made a little gesture to indicate Harriet Payne.

"I have told no one, and shall not do so until my purpose is accomplished," said Barbara.

"Mistress, I have some knowledge of things in the West. My fiddle and I hear many things, and I might give you useful news."

"You cannot help me in this, Martin."

"I am under no oath not to thwart you should the price you are prepared to pay be too large."

"That is why I do not tell you, Martin."

Fairley asked no further question, but rode on by the carriage in silence. He believed that she was going to bargain with Lord Rosmore, and his brain was full of schemes to frustrate her, or at least to prevent her fulfilling the bargain, even if it were made. It was not necessary to be honest in dealing with such a scoundrel, he argued, and even if it were wise to let the bargain be struck, he would see to it that Lord Rosmore should not profit by it.

"This is the road," he said to the post-boy, and the carriage swung round into what was little more than a lane.

Harriet Payne gave a little cry, and looked from the window.

"I thought we were over, but we are off the road. Forbid this way, mistress; I pray you forbid it."

For an instant Barbara wondered whether this was a scheme of Martin's to

keep her from her purpose but the idea was absurd. He was as anxious that Gilbert Crosby should be rescued as she was. She commanded Harriet to keep quiet.

Progress was slower now, for this side road was heavy, and the coach came near to being overturned more than once.

"It will be better presently," said Martin, but it was a long time before his prophecy came true, and when it did, the improvement was not very great.

"I wouldn't have come if I had known," growled the post-boy.

"You'll go where you're told," said Martin, "and the more words about it, the less pay."

They had travelled slowly for an hour or more, along a winding road between thick copses and high-hedged fields, when Martin suddenly brought his horse to a standstill and listened.

"Stop!" he said to the post-boy, and immediately the grinding wheels were still.

There was the quick thud of hoofs behind them, coming so rapidly that there was no hope of escape if they were pursued. Barbara leaned forward, looking at Martin as he unfastened the holster and half drew out a pistol; but Harriet Payne had thrust her head from the other window.

"I knew it! He has betrayed us!" she said shrilly.

"The devil take that wench!" growled Martin.

Two men rode round the bend in the road, then two more, then others, a score of them at least. With an oath Martin let the pistol fall back into the holster. The odds were too great. His head sunk a little, and he looked strangely limp in his saddle.

"Fire at them! Be a man and defend us!" shrieked Harriet, but Martin did not move.

Barbara looked at him with wondering eyes; she was still looking at him when the coach was surrounded.

"Your servants, Mistress Lanison," said a man at the door. "We are sent to bring you to Dorchester."

"By whom?"

"I had my orders from my superior; I cannot say who first gave them."

"I am travelling to Dorchester."

"We must be your escort, madam."

"Am I a prisoner?"

"One that shall be well treated by us and by all, I trust. This rogue here has led you off the road. A little further from the highway and I

suppose you would have robbed them, you scoundrel."

"No, sir, I only thought the dust would be less this way," Fairley answered meekly.

Another man looked keenly at Martin, and then laughed.

"Surely this is that fiddler fellow we know something of?"

"Yes, sir," said Martin, crooking his arm as though a fiddle were in it, and in a timid voice he sang a few notes, like a wail, but they had often seemed a laugh to Barbara. She could not tell which they were now. "My fiddle is lost, or I would play for you, so long, so sweetly, that you would see flagons of ale around you, and think you tasted them too."

"I would the fiddle were found, then," said one.

"Having lost it, you carry pistols instead."

"Yes, sir, every gentleman does so, but there's many dare not use them. I didn't use them. You'll remember that, for it's to my credit, and let me go."

The man removed the pistols from his holster.

"They're dangerous toys for a fool."

"Truly, I feel much happier without them," said Martin.

"Coward!" said Harriet Payne from the window as the coach was turned. "Coward!"

Barbara said nothing.

"Please let me ride by the other window," pleaded Martin. "This wench has no music in her soul, and does not like me."

"You shall ride behind," was the answer.

"Thank you, sir; I shall not see her then. She is not beautiful to look at."

The man laughed.

"Look to this fool, some of you, and give him a cuff if he grows sleepy."

"Sleepy! Never in good company," said Martin.

The post-boy whipped up the horses, and the carriage went slowly back towards the main road, surrounded by its escort.

Barbara was still bound for Dorchester, but a prisoner. Would she now be able to get speech with Judge Marriott?

CHAPTER XIX

THE HUT IN THE WOOD

The grinding of wheels, the sharp stroke of horses' hoofs, and the voices of men lessened and died into silence. No sound disturbed the narrow, winding lane which twisted its way now between neglected and forlorn looking fields, presently through woods of larch and pine, again across some deserted piece of common land. One might have followed the lane for hours without meeting a soul, without hearing a human sound beyond the echoes of one's own footsteps sent back from the depth of a copse. For miles it went, turning now this way, now that, until a stranger would wonder whither it was leading him, and speculate whether, at the end, he might not find himself on the same high road which he had left long ago. At one part, for a mile or more, the lane skirted a forest, where, down short vistas, could be seen deeper depths beyond, solemn gloom which might serve to hide in, or might contain lurking danger. Old cart ruts here and there made short incursions into it, their limit marked by a small clearing and a few tree stumps, showing that timber had been brought out; but no such track gave any sign of penetrating far, and offered little temptation to explore. There was a track, however, so casual in its departure from the lane that a stranger would hardly have noticed it, which ran deeply into the forest, losing itself at intervals in a small clearing, but going on again, although anyone but those who had knowledge of it might miss it a score of times, and wander hopelessly amongst tangled undergrowths and into swampy depressions. This track presently crossed a larger clearing, where was a hut set up by charcoal burners long ago. Time had cracked and warped its planks, but pieces had been nailed across weak places, giving the hut a botched and tumble-down appearance but keeping it weather-tight. The hut was divided into a shed for tools and storage, or perhaps for stabling a horse upon occasion, and a larger chamber which served as a dwelling. From a hole in the roof of this part a thin wreath of smoke was curling upwards towards the overhanging trees, losing itself in their foliage. Twilight came early here, and the great world seemed shut out altogether.

Presently the door of the hut opened, but he was no charcoal-burner who stood on the threshold, listening and looking up at the sky above the clearing. His hair was white, his figure a little bent, and there was an anxious look upon his face, a permanent expression rather than one caused by any tardy arrival this evening. The man he waited for was too erratic in his goings and comings to make a few hours', or even a day's, delay a cause of wonder.

He went back into the hut, but in half an hour or so came to the door again. He was not a woodsman used to distinguishing sounds at a long distance, and the sound that presently reached him was close by. In another moment a man, leading a horse, came out of the gloomy shadows into the clearing.

"Master Gilbert! Master Gilbert! You're late. Thank God you're back once more. I've a hare in the pot which begins to smell excellently."

"I'll do justice to your cooking, Golding, never fear. I'll look to the mare first; she's had a trying day."

He led the animal into the small shed, and for some time was busy making her comfortable for the night.

"Ah! the smell is appetising," he said as he joined Golding, "and I am ravenous."

"And in good spirits, surely."

"Yes, we baulked them again, Golding. Yesterday afternoon we made in the direction of Witley, and had as narrow a squeak of capture as I want to experience. A troop was before us on the road, and one fellow with the eyes of a lynx sighted us. The poor fellow I was helping was a bit of a coward--no, I won't call him that, but constantly being hunted had taken the heart out of him, and he was inclined to give up the struggle. I urged him on, and we made for Witley, openly, and as if we were confident of a hiding-place in the town. Fortune favoured us, and we pulled up short in a hollow, the troop riding by us in desperate haste. Hot footed they poured into Witley, but for some reason which I did not understand they went no further. Half an hour afterwards they came back, all but two of them. I had counted them as they passed. Those two remained in Witley until long after nightfall, then they rode back, and my man had a free country before him."

"You'll run the risk once too often, Master Gilbert."

"That is probable, but, by Jove! I shall have done some good with my life. This was the thirty-eighth man I've helped out of the clutches of these devils."

"And I was the first," said Golding. "It's wonderful how you schemed to get me out of Dorchester, Master Gilbert."

"And it's marvellous how you manage to make this hut a home that one is glad to get back to, Golding."

"Maybe we'll get back to Lenfield presently, Master Gilbert, and you'll then shudder at the thought of what you had to put up with here."

"It will be some time before there will be safety for me at Lenfield," said Crosby.

"And meanwhile a hare's no such bad fare, if the preparing and cooking of it does present some difficulties in a place like this," said Golding as he replenished his master's plate.

Crosby had eaten little in the last twenty-four hours, and was silent for some time.

"Thirty-eight is something, but it's a drop in the ocean," he said presently. "I wish I could open the prison doors in Dorchester before the assizes commence. There'll be murder enough done there in a few days, Golding."

"That is beyond your power, Master Gilbert," and the old man said it as if he feared his master would make the attempt.

"Yes, I am powerless. I wonder what became of that girl, Golding."

"Do you mean Harriet Payne?"

"I had forgotten her name for the moment," said Crosby. "When I came to

Dorchester after they had arrested you, I found out where you were, but I could hear nothing about her. I would give a great deal to set her free."

"Yes, Master Gilbert."

"It is frightful for a woman to be in the clutches of these devils, and when that fiend Jeffreys comes to Dorchester, God help the women he judges! I wonder what has become of the girl."

"She may have been released."

"Why should they release her when they would think it was within her power to betray me?"

Golding shrugged his shoulders. "It was only a suggestion," he said.

"What is in your mind?" Crosby asked.

"An unjust thought, Master Gilbert. Since thirty years ago the one woman I ever thought of jilted me, I've had no love for any woman. I'm afraid of them and unjust in my thoughts of them. My opinion concerning women is of no value."

"What were you thinking about Harriet Payne?"

"She was a bit flighty, Master Gilbert, and rather given to look down on the other servants. That kind of girl is open to flattery."

"And then, Golding?"

"Then! Well, I'm no judge of women, but it seems to me that once they're fond of flattery you can make them do almost anything. She was a good-looking girl, was Harriet Payne, and if some young slip of a dandy got hold of her--well, she might make a bargain with him and get released that way."

"Was she that kind of girl?"

"I'm not saying so; I'm only putting it as a possibility," Golding answered. "Such bargains have been made, Master Gilbert, if the tales they tell be true."

Crosby clenched his teeth suddenly, and struck his fist irritably on his knee. One such tale he had heard, told of the brutal Colonel Kirke, a woman's honour sacrificed to save her lover, and sacrificed in vain. He was prepared to believe any villainy of such a man, and there were many, little better than Kirke, free to work their will in the West Country to-day. He was conscious of the ribbon about his neck, he remembered that handclasp in the hidden chamber below Aylingford Abbey, and thanked Heaven that the fair woman who had done so much to help him was in London.

"Such thoughts make me sick, Golding," he said after a long pause. "I feel that I must rush into the midst of such villains and strike, strike until I am cut down. Sometimes there comes the belief that if a man had the courage to charge boldly into such iniquity, God Himself would fight beside him and give him victory."

"There peeps out the Puritan faith of your fathers, Master Gilbert. It's a good faith, but over confident of miracles. You'd be foolish throwing your life away trying the impossible when there is so much you are able to do well."

"I argued like that only a few hours since," said Crosby. "But, for all that, there's a taste of cowardice left behind in the mouth. I should have been back early this afternoon but for the fact that this troop I spoke of was still hanging about the highway yonder."

"They did not see you!" Golding said in alarm. "They will not track you here?"

"They were not watching for me. I take it the men were ordered not to follow us beyond Witley, but to wait for other prey that was expected. I did not see how it happened, nor where, only the result. They had captured a coach, and were guarding it on the way to Dorchester. What unfortunate travellers it contained I do not know, I was at too great a distance to see. But in the midst of the villains there was a captured horseman, and they seemed to be ill-treating him. I touched the mare with the spur, thinking to go to his aid, but drew rein again immediately. There was at least a score of men to 'do battle with."

"A wise second thought," said Golding.

"Leaving a taste in my mouth," said Crosby. "I thought I heard something, Golding."

"It was the mare in the shed."

"I heard her, but something else besides, I fancy," and, with Golding at his heels, he went out of the hut to listen. There were stars in the sky over the clearing. The night had fallen, and strange sounds came from the gloomy depths of the forest, sounds which might well set an unaccustomed ear intent to catch their meaning. Gilbert Crosby may not have been able to account for all of them, but they did not trouble him. It was another sound he waited and listened for.

"There is nothing, Master Gilbert," Golding whispered.

"Wait."

Golding saw that a pistol was in his master's hand, so he took one slowly from his pocket and tried to look into the darkness.

It was well that Gilbert Crosby saw the coach from such a distance, that he could not catch a glimpse of the travellers. Had he known who the travellers were, the spurs would have been driven deep into the mare's flanks and there would have been no drawing rein; had he even recognised the horseman who was being ill-treated he would not have paused to count the cost. A trooper or two might have gone down before his fierce attack, but a score of men, trained in fighting and on the alert, cannot be scattered by one. Gilbert Crosby would have been flung lifeless on the roadside, or overpowered and carried a prisoner to Dorchester.

The two women sat silently in the coach. Harriet Payne sobbed quietly. She was tired of abusing Martin, weary of telling her mistress that they ought to have kept to the high road and safety. At first she had broken out at intervals with her wailing, and Barbara's commands to be silent

had not much effect.

Barbara did not answer her, did not look at her. Her own thoughts and fears were trouble enough. A trap had been laid for her, doubtless it was of her uncle's contriving, and it was unlikely that she would be able to send even a message to Judge Marriott. Her mission was doomed to failure, and she was in the hands of her enemies. What could they compel her to do? Was marriage with Lord Rosmore the only way out? She would never take that way. Though they accused her of treason, though death threatened her, she would never marry him. To Judge Marriott she was prepared to sacrifice herself, but to Lord Rosmore never, not even to save the life of the man she loved. There had been moments when an alliance with Rosmore had not appeared so dreadful to her, moments when her disappointment concerning Gilbert Crosby had helped to make Rosmore less repugnant to her; but from the moment she had determined to sacrifice herself these two men stood in clear and definite antagonism. The one she loved, the other she hated. Why she should so love and so hate she could not have explained fully, but the love and hate were facts, and she made no attempt to reason about them.

She heard Martin's voice at intervals, complaining, garrulous, and then suddenly jesting, jests not meant for her ears, but fitted to the rough company in the midst of which he rode. Poor Martin, she thought, Mad Martin. This might make him mad indeed, drive from him entirely that strange wit he had and which he used so wonderfully at times. He had been her playfellow, and her teacher, too, in many things, yet he was one of God's fools. There was compensation in that surely.

Barbara winced presently when Martin's voice was raised in higher complaint.

"What are you trying to do, you fool?" cried a gruff voice.

"I want to see that my mistress is happy. She would like me to ride beside her window; and I will, too."

It was probably at this moment that Gilbert Crosby caught sight of the cavalcade, and thought the prisoner was being vilely ill-used. Well might he think so, for Martin attempted to force his way through the troopers and get to the window.

"She's used to me," he literally screamed. "See what an ugly fellow is beside the window now! Truth, I never saw so many ugly men together. Let me pass!"

"Peace, Martin, I am all right!" Barbara called from the window, fearful that these men might do him an injury.

"Take that idiot further back!" roared the voice of the man in command of the troop. "He does naught but frighten the lady."

Martin received a cuff on the head, and was hustled to the rear, a man riding on either side of him.

"Who was the gentleman who struck me?" whined Martin, rubbing his head.

"Sayers. His is a good hand for dusting off flies," laughed one of the men beside him, willing to get some sport out of this madman.

"Flies! To judge by my head he must have fancied he saw a bullock before him. Lucky I dodged somewhat, or I'd have no head for flies to settle on. And who is the gentleman with the voice of thunder?"

"That's Watson."

"It's a good voice, but there's no music in it. You have never heard him sing, eh?"

"Aye, but I have. He can roar a fine stave about wine and women."

"I'll go and ask him to favour us," said Martin, jerking his horse forward.

"Stay where you are," and the man's hand shot out to the horse's bridle.

"Very well, very well, if you like my company so much. It's a strange thing that they should put wine and women into the same song."

"Strange, you fool! Strong enough and beautiful enough, are they not both intoxicating?"

"I know not," Martin answered. "I have no experience of strong women."

"Strong wine and beautiful women," I said.

"Did you. I am rather dull of hearing."

"You're a dull-witted fellow altogether to my thinking."

"It is most true, sir. I am so dull that I cannot see the wit in your conversation."

"I can cuff almost as vigorously as Sayers," said the man a little angrily, when his companion on the other side of Martin laughed.

"I will believe it without demonstration," said Martin, cringing in his saddle. "You frighten me, and now I have lost my stirrups. I am no rider to get on without them. I shall fall. Of your kindness, gentlemen, find me my stirrups."

"Plague on you for a fool," said one.

"A blessing on you if you get my feet into the stirrups."

"Stop, then, a moment."

Martin pulled up, and the cavalcade went on. The two men, one on either side, brought their horses close to Martin's, and bent down to find the stirrups. Martin suddenly gave both horses the spur in the flanks with a backward fling of his heels, and at the same time struck each man a heavy blow on his lowered head. The horses sprang aside, one rider falling in the roadway, the other stumbling with his animal into the ditch by the roadside. The next instant Martin had whipped round his own horse, and was galloping back along the road.

It had been the work of a few seconds, and a few seconds more elapsed before the cavalcade came to a standstill.

Then a voice roared orders, half a dozen shots sang about the fugitive, and there were galloping horses quickly in pursuit.

Expecting the shots, Martin had flung himself low on the horse's neck. The animal, frightened by the swinging stirrups and driven by the spur, plunged madly along the road. So long as the road was straight, Martin let the horse go, but at the first bend, when there was no chance of his pursuers seeing him, he checked the animal a little, slipped from his back, and with a blow sent him careering riderless along the road.

"He'll make a fine chase for them, and should find his way back to Witley," said Martin as he crouched down in a ditch which divided the road from a wood. Cracking branches might have betrayed him had he entered the wood just then. Half a dozen horsemen passed him, galloping in pursuit, and when the sounds had died away, and he was convinced that no others followed, he crawled from the ditch and went straight before him into the wood. At a clearing he stopped and looked at the stars, then continued his way along a narrow track that went towards the south-west, in which direction lay Dorchester. He had no mind to enter the town as a prisoner, but he meant to reach it all the same, and as soon as possible.

For an hour he pushed forward, and then came suddenly to the edge of a clearing of some size. He stopped. He saw nothing, he was not sure that he heard anything, but the air seemed to vibrate with some presence besides his own.

Perhaps he had heard the low sound which the opening door of the hut made.

"You're a dead man if you move," said a voice out of the darkness.

Fairley started and made a step forward, but stopped in time.

"I should know that voice. I am Martin Fairley."

"Fairley!"

Crosby hurried forward to meet him.

"Have you been a prisoner in Dorchester?" Martin asked.

"A prisoner! No."

"The devil take that wench!"

"What wench?" Crosby asked.

"Give me something to drink and a mouthful of food. The story may be told in a few words, and then we must get to Dorchester."

"Martin! Why? Surely she--"

"Yes; she will be there within an hour or so. That is why we go to Dorchester to-night."

CHAPTER XX

SCARLET HANGINGS

Barbara's prison was an old house in a narrow street of Dorchester, the ground floor of which had been turned into temporary barracks for soldiers and militiamen. The prisoner passed to rooms on the upper floor through a rough, gaping crowd, and in some faces pity shone through brutality for a moment. Something worse than death might await so fair a traitor.

The rooms to which she was taken were sparsely furnished and rather dark, the windows looking out upon a blank wall, two rooms communicating, but with only a single entrance from the passage without. The most hopeful would have seen little prospect of escape, and the most spirited might wonder if depression could be successfully conquered in such surroundings. Half a dozen soldiers had followed them up the stairs, but only Watson, whose stentorian voice seemed to fit him to command a troop of ruffians, entered the room with them.

"There are so many prisoners in Dorchester that we have to make shift to find room for them," he said, as though to make apology for the accommodation.

"Indeed, I might be much worse lodged," Barbara answered.

Harriet Payne looked round the rooms in dismay, but said nothing.

"May I know what charge is brought against me?" asked Barbara.

"With that I have naught to do," Watson answered. "I'm a soldier, not a lawyer, madam. My orders are to keep you in safe custody until your presence is required, and I am told to see that you have everything in reason to make you comfortable."

"It would appear that I have friends in Dorchester."

"It is not unlikely, madam; as for this young person," he went on, looking at Harriet, "she will see to your wants and may pass in and out. I suppose, therefore, that nothing is known against her beyond the fact that she is found in your company."

"Your temporary mistress is evidently a dangerous person, Harriet," Barbara said with a smile. "Had I not forced you to make this perilous journey with me, you would have been better off."

This deliberate attempt to dissociate her from any treasonable intention rather startled Harriet Payne.

"At least you shall find the comfort of having a maid with you, madam," she said quickly.

"If the young person will come with me, I will show her where certain things you may require can be found," said Watson. "There will be a sentry constantly in the passage, madam, so if you hear footsteps in the night you need not fear."

Barbara made no answer to this indirect warning that any thought of

flight was hopeless, and Harriet followed Watson out of the room.

"It was well done," he whispered as they went down the passage, leaving a sentry by the locked door.

"I was not looking for your praise."

"It is given gratis," the man answered, "and in the same spirit I'll give you a warning: don't attempt the impossible, whatever happens. A woman like her yonder might succeed in wheedling any man, or woman."

"I want neither your praise nor your warning," said Harriet.

"And I'm not looking for another clout on the ear, mistress, such as you gave me at Witley, though, for that matter, I like a woman of spirit. If you're in want of a comforter later on, you may reckon on Sam Watson."

"And Sam Watson had best be careful, or he may find himself in hot water with his master," Harriet answered with a toss of her head.

For herself, Barbara Lanison had little thought, but her fears for others troubled her. As a prisoner her power to help Gilbert Crosby was grievously lessened. Doubtless she herself was to be accused of treason, and Judge Marriott might be afraid to say a word at her bidding, or perchance he would refuse if the power to make the sacrifice she intended were taken from her. Death might be her punishment for treason, and if so, where was Judge Marriott's reward? There was another contingency: he might be able to save her, and he would certainly use his efforts to this end instead of troubling about Crosby, no matter what pleading she might use. As a prisoner she was, indeed, of little use to Gilbert Crosby. She must see Judge Marriott and do her best, but her hope of success was small. Who had brought this disaster upon her? Surely her guardian, and Barbara's hands clenched in impotent rage to think that he had outwitted her. Yet he could not be alone in the matter, for it was not probable that he had openly accused her himself. Had Rosmore anything to do with it? It was a new thought to Barbara. She knew her uncle for a villain, but about Lord Rosmore she was undecided. True, he had threatened her, but he also loved her, she could not doubt that in his own fashion he did so. Would a man place the woman he loved in such jeopardy as that in which she was placed? Barbara could not believe it possible; besides, how should Lord Rosmore know that she was on her way to Dorchester? The coming of Harriet Payne to Aylingford had aroused Sir John's suspicions, but there was no circumstance which would lead Rosmore to suppose that she intended journeying to the West.

Martin Fairley also troubled her. Had he made good his escape, or had he been retaken and confined somewhere else in the town? She had asked the man Watson as the cavalcade had started again, and his gruff reply was that the fool would be left dead in the ditch by the roadside. She did not believe Martin was dead; in fact, Martin puzzled her. He could not have had a hand in her betrayal, yet, at the very moment when courage was most needed, he had been a coward. Probably he had saved himself, but he had deserted her. The one person upon whose fidelity she would have staked her honour had utterly forsaken her at a supreme moment. Full as her mind was of Gilbert Crosby, the failure of this half-witted companion depressed her as, perhaps, nothing else could have done.

Had he really deserted her? The question came through the long, wakeful hours of the night. It came with the memory of that little cadence of

notes, the same notes in which his fiddle laughed. He had sung them in a foolish fashion when the men surrounded the coach; had he meant to speak to her by them? The thought brought hope and sleep, sleep giving strength, hope bringing new courage when the day came.

"To help Mr. Crosby I must speak with Judge Marriott, who is in Dorchester," she told Harriet Payne. "You must find him and ask him to come to me."

"Will he come, madam?"

"I think so."

"Alas, you have need of help yourself now."

"Perhaps not such need as may appear. To arrest me does not prove me guilty of treason."

"It is not only the guilty who are suffering."

"Out upon you, girl, for whining so easily," said Barbara. "Courage lends help against every ill, even against death itself. You will find where Judge Marriott is lodged, and tell him where I am."

"They may not let me have speech with the judge."

"You must contrive, use art, use--Ah, you are a woman, and need no lesson from me."

So Harriet Payne went upon her mission, and Barbara was impatient until her return. Disappointment was upon the girl's face when she came back. It had been easy to find out the judge's lodgings, but impossible to get speech with him. He was too engaged to see anyone that day.

"I must try again to-morrow," said the girl.

"Yes, and the next day and the next," said Barbara. "Did anyone carry a message for you?"

"I contrived so far, but whether it came to the judge's ears or not I cannot tell."

"I'll ask this man Watson to take a message," said Barbara.

"Not yet," said the girl. "That might be dangerous. Wait until I have entirely failed"; and, to prove how dangerous it might be, she began to tell her mistress some of the gloomy forebodings which were whispered about the town.

Dorchester was in terror, and spoke its fears with bated breath. There were three hundred prisoners awaiting judgment, and the dreaded Jeffreys was coming; the cruel, the brutal, the malignant judge whose fame, like an evil angel, came before him, speaking of death. There was to be no pity, no mercy. If Alice Lisle, for no greater fault than compassion for two fugitives, was condemned with all the barbarity that the inhuman law could render possible; if the appeal of clergy, of ladies of high degree, of counsellors at Whitehall, of Feversham himself, could only move the King to grant that she should be beheaded instead of burned alive, what hope for the prisoners in Dorchester who would have no such

powerful appeal made in their favour?

The Court was already prepared, its hangings of scarlet. Judge Marriott, busily awaiting his learned brother, chuckled at the innovation. It was like Jeffreys--an original thing, a stroke of genius. Men quaked because of those scarlet hangings; this was to be no ordinary assizes, but a marked occasion which should put fear into the souls of all who should even think upon rebellion. Some man, in an awed undertone, spoke of it as a bloody assizes, and the name passed from lip to lip until it reached Judge Marriott's lodging. He chuckled still more, and said to those about him that Jeffreys would act up to the name, here and wherever else in this cursed West Country there were prisoners to be punished.

Bloody Assizes! It was almost the first articulate sound that Lord Rosmore heard as he galloped into the town, a troop of men about him, and those who watched him pass knew that the judge must be on his way from Winchester. Rosmore laughed, but his thoughts were complex, schemes ran riot in his brain. Immediately upon entering his lodging he sent for Watson and Sayers, and was restless until they came.

He looked quickly towards the door as it opened.

"The lady is safe in Dorchester," said Watson.

"And the fugitive?"

"We followed him to Witley. We should have run him to earth, only your orders were not to go beyond Witley."

"This cursed fellow Crosby, what of him?"

"He was with this fugitive."

"And you let him go!" exclaimed Rosmore, stamping his foot passionately.

"We obeyed orders, sir, and it is well we did so. We, Sayers and I, were in Witley when the coach arrived. I had speech with Mistress Payne."

A grim smile overspread Sayers' face as he remembered the box on the ear his companion had received, but he saw that Lord Rosmore was in no mood to relish such a tale just now, and held his tongue.

"I told her something of what was to happen, and the place," said Watson, "but had I not known at what hour the coach was to start, and when we might expect it at the spot chosen, we should have been outwitted. In the morning that fiddler from Aylingford caught the coach, and in some manner had got wind that a trap was set. He persuaded the lady to take a by-road. I waited, and then, marvelling at the delay, ordered the troop to ride forward to meet the coach. At the corner where this by-way turns from the high road, we found a handkerchief lying on the grass--Mistress Payne's handkerchief. Had it not been for such a signal we had ridden past, and might have failed to catch them."

"Fairley! Then you have him too?"

"We had, sir, but he escaped."

"Escaped!"

"I have the two men who let him go under arrest," Watson answered. "One so badly hurt by the fall from his horse that it will be weeks before he can fling his leg across saddle again."

"You fools! The girl has more sense in her finger than you can muster in the whole of your carcasses. How did he get away?"

"By a trick," said Sayers. "He was taken to the rear to keep him from his mistress, and, on pretence of losing his stirrups, got the men beside him to come close, when he spurred their horses, striking the men at the same time. He was round in a minute and galloping back upon the road. Half a dozen of us went in pursuit, when the shots fired after him failed to stop him. We went the whole way back to Witley, and there, at the inn, found the horse lathered with foam. The animal had entered the yard riderless!"

"What fools I have to serve me!" said Rosmore, laughing derisively. "Apart from the woman, it would have been failure from beginning to end."

The derision hurt Watson.

"Care must be taken even of her, my lord."

"What do you mean?"

"There is generally a tender spot in a woman somewhere, and Mistress Lanison may chance to find it in Harriet Payne."

"Mistress Payne is to be trusted, Watson. I'll see to that."

"She would turn her wits against you, my lord, if she thought she were deceived. That's as sure as the coming of the Sabbath."

"Do you suppose, Watson, I throw away the skin before I have used all the fruit? Send the girl to me to-night."

The men saluted and turned.

"And Watson, you might put a little misery into your face and commiserate with Mistress Lanison on her position. It might interest her to hear the story of Alice Lisle of Winchester. She is high-spirited, and I would have that spirit broken."

"I will play Jeremiah, sir, like any Puritan."

"And Sayers, keep your eyes open in Dorchester. Crosby and this fiddler are too cunning not to be dangerous. I warrant they are not far away from Mistress Lanison. By Heaven! if you let her slip through your fingers now, you shall suffer for it!"

Bloody Assizes! Along West Street the name travelled to the "Anchor Inn," that hostelry of mean repute in Dorchester, and to a small upper room where three men sat. They leaned towards each other as they spoke.

"I have failed to find out where they have taken her," said one. "It must have been dark when they entered Dorchester; I can find no one who remembers such a cavalcade in the streets. I am at a loss how to

discover her prison."

"Think, Martin."

"I have never been so barren of schemes as I am now. Have you no suggestion, Crosby?"

"I want to kill Rosmore."

"And you, Mr. Fellowes?"

"Here I may be of service. I am known as a soldier and a King's man," he answered. "My presence in Dorchester will not be called in question, and I may learn what is the real plot on foot. Until we know it, we can hardly scheme to prevent it."

"An excellent plan," said Martin. "There is another scheme half-born within me. I will let it mature to-night. Courage, comrades. Three honest men are worth many scoundrels. Three lovers of one woman, for so we are in our different fashions."

"That is true," said Crosby.

"Quite true," murmured Fellowes.

"And we strive together," said Martin, letting his hand fall on the table. It was covered immediately by the other men's hands.

"Heart and soul for Mistress Lanison," said Fellowes.

"Heart and soul," said Crosby.

"Three honest and true men," murmured Fairley, and tears were in his eyes. "A triple alliance."

CHAPTER XXI

LORD ROSMORE DICTATES TERMS

Lord Rosmore thought little about the assizes as he supped alone and drank his wine, unconscious of the many times he filled and emptied the glass. The hunting of fugitives was not to his taste, unless the fugitive chanced to be his personal enemy. He was sick at some of the cruelties he had been forced to witness; he hated and despised Judge Jeffreys, and almost shuddered at the thought of the punishment which was about to fall upon the crowd of ignorant peasants imprisoned in Dorchester. Had he been judge he would have treated them leniently, and probably no fear of the King's displeasure would have made him act otherwise; but for the furtherance of his own desires he had another standard of morality. It was not a standard made to suit the present circumstances, but one that had guided him through life, the primitive ideal that what a man desires he must fight for and take as best he may. From his youth upwards he had coveted little that he had not obtained; the success was everything, the means used did not trouble him. If fair ones failed, foul ones were resorted to, and his conscience troubled him

not at all. If, without hindrance to himself, he could return some service for one rendered, he did so, and with a certain class of men and women won for himself a name for generosity. To withstand him, however, no matter in how small a thing, to baulk his aims and desires, directly or indirectly, was to turn him into an implacable enemy, the more dangerous because no scruple of honour would weigh with him or direct his actions. At the present moment he knew three persons were opposed to him--Gilbert Crosby; the fiddler, Martin Fairley; and Barbara Lanison. Had the first two been in his hands he would have destroyed them. If, to accomplish this, false witnesses had to be found, he would have found them, and would have slept not one whit the less at night. He hated them both, and was still scheming for their downfall. Had circumstances so chanced that these two were powerless to be of further danger to him, he would still have hated them, would still have crushed them at the first opportunity. He was not a man to forgive an injury.

Truly, they were almost powerless to baulk him now, he argued, as he drained his glass again. What could two men do in Dorchester at the present moment, with the town full of soldiers, and Jeffreys at hand to deal out summary justice? The brown mask no longer hid a person of mystery; the features of Gilbert Crosby were known to dozens of men who had been outwitted by him. He would not dare to walk the streets by day. As for this fiddler fellow, what power had he to cajole rough soldiery? He might work upon the superstition of Sir John Lanison at Aylingford, might play upon the heartstrings of a woman, but these hard-drinking, hard-swearing men were not likely to fall victims to his fooleries. Even if he discovered where his mistress was lodged, he would not be able to come near her.

"I have played the trump card and taken the trick," laughed Rosmore.
"Now comes the taming of Mistress Lanison. I should hate her for defying me did I not desire her so much."

What he chose to think love was perhaps not far removed from hate. He longed to possess, to bend to his will, to have the woman who stood for so much in the estimation of so many men. Self-gratification controlled him, the desire that men should once again know how useless it was to attempt rivalry with him. He had a reputation to maintain, and he would maintain it at all hazards. He had begun to weigh carefully in his mind the plans he had formed, when the door opened.

"Ah! you loveable little trickster!" he exclaimed as Harriet Payne entered. "Come and let me thank you. Gold and trinkets I have none to-night; but--"

"I do not want them," she said.

"Love and kisses, my love and kisses," he said, drawing her on to his knee. "I've spent wakeful nights thinking of you; now I am happy again."

After a while she disengaged herself a little from his embrace.

"Playing the traitor is not pleasant," she said.

"It is a despicable game," he answered, filling a glass with wine and handing it to her. "Drink confusion to all traitors."

"That would be to curse myself."

"You are so clever that I wonder you should think me capable of asking you to do a treacherous action, even for love of me," said Rosmore. "You shall know my great scheme now that you have so well earned full partnership in it. But tell me the whole story first. I heard of the dropped handkerchief. That was excellently conceived."

Harriet told him of her visit to Barbara Lanison in London, repeating almost word for word what had been said. She told him of the journey to Dorchester, almost acted for his benefit the part of sobbing and frightened woman which she had played so well, and Rosmore laughed and applauded her.

"Excellent! Most excellent!"

"And now?" said the girl, "what is to happen? What is in store for her now she is in Dorchester? You swore to me that I should not be bringing her into the hands of Judge Jeffreys. Into whose hands have I delivered her?"

"Into mine," said Rosmore.

"For what purpose?"

"To save her from herself. It is a long story, but you shall have it presently. I shall still want your help."

"You do not love her?" the girl questioned almost fiercely, "There are those about you who believe that I am your plaything, useful to do your bidding, only to be thrown aside when you have no more need of me."

"Who has dared to say so? Tell me!" Rosmore was splendid in his sudden wrath, and Harriet Payne was a little frightened.

"Nay, I will not injure anyone. It is natural for a man to think so seeing what you are and what I am."

Rosmore turned her towards a mirror on the wall.

"Learn, mistress, to value yourself at something nearer your true worth. I see in the mirror as dainty a piece of womanhood as this fair land, with all its treasures of beauty, holds. Hast heard of Trojan Helen, that woman who was a world's desire, whose beauty made men sigh for her until they fell ill with their desire; for whom two nations fought, pouring out their noblest blood for her possession through ten long years, and at the end dooming a city to flames and massacre? I would not have you so like this ancient Helen that all the world should be my rival, for then could I not hope to have my arms about you as now they are; but as she was fair, so are you; as beside her all women were naught, so to me are all women naught beside you. Kiss me, and, if you will not tell me who has done me such slander, at least know this that they were lying words which he spoke."

She kissed him, contented.

"Then you will not treat her harshly?" the girl said. "Mistress Lanison is a true, brave woman; I would not have her hurt in any way."

"It is my desire to help her, as I will show you presently," Rosmore returned. "Tell me what she has said to you. Two women in adversity ever

grow confidential."

"I do not know whether she loves Mr. Crosby--I think there are barriers which even love cannot break down--but she is willing to make some great sacrifice for him, that is why she consented to come to the West. No sooner were we lodged in Dorchester than she sent me with a message to Judge Marriott praying him to go to her."

"And you delivered the message."

"I made pretence of doing so, but told her that I could not get speech with the judge."

"You are as wise as you are fair," said Rosmore. "I must see Marriott at once. He is a blundering fool, this judge, and might ruin everything. Tell me, have you seen Mr. Crosby since he fled from Lenfield?"

"And you threatened to have my shoulders bared and whipped!" laughed the girl. "No, I have not seen him since then."

"It was the bare shoulders I thought of, not the whipping, you witch."

"Now, tell me your purpose concerning Mistress Lanison," said the girl.

"She is a woman in love," said Rosmore, "and loves not as her guardian would have her do. It is the usual way of women who have guardians. Had you such an ogre to direct your actions and you loved me, he would be certain to have some other lover for you and would hate me. This is Mistress Lanison's case, and although she does not like me, I would do her a service and outwit her guardian. I would--"

He stopped suddenly. There were footsteps in the passage, and Harriet slipped from his knee and was standing sedately at a little distance from him when the door opened and a servant entered.

"Judge Marriott is asking to see you, my lord."

"I was thinking of him. Bring him in." Then, as the servant departed, he turned to Harriet: "Come this way, into this other room."

"Your room!" she exclaimed. "I would not have anyone find me here."

"No one shall enter unless they kill me first upon the threshold. Have no fear. You could not leave the house unseen by Judge Marriott, and I would not have him see you for the world. He is foul-mouthed and foul-minded. Let the curtain fall close, so, to keep from you as much of his conversation as possible."

Lord Rosmore crossed the room to meet his guest as the door opened.

"This assize work makes one thirsty, Rosmore, and, hearing you had arrived, a longing came over me to drink a bottle with you."

"You are welcome. Within a few minutes I should have been knocking at your door had you not come."

"Good! Then we may have an hour's peace. The town's astir, Rosmore; there'll be great doings in Dorchester. Do you hear what that wag Jeffreys has done? He has had the court hung with scarlet to mark the

occasion. He does not mean his lesson to die quickly out of the memory."

"That is what they mean, then, by 'Bloody Assizes.' I heard the name whispered as I entered the town."

"Oh, they were quick enough to see that this was no ordinary dispensation of law," laughed Marriott. "The dogs are sleepless and trembling to-night, I warrant."

"Aye, it is certainly the King's turn now, and I would he were making better use of his opportunity."

"What a glutton you are, Rosmore. There are over three hundred prisoners in Dorchester alone."

"And most of them might be released," was the answer. "Such clemency would do more for the King" than will be accomplished by this revengeful spirit."

"Since when have you turned sentimental?"

"I think I was born with a horror of wholesale injustice."

Marriott laughed, then grew serious.

"We are old friends, Rosmore, and there is no danger in free speech between us, but it would not be wise to say such things in the hearing of Jeffreys."

"Even Jeffreys may have a weak spot to touch which would be to compel him to silence. Most men have."

"They hide it successfully as a rule."

"Or think so," said Rosmore. "Amongst these three hundred prisoners are there any of importance?"

The judge shrugged his shoulders.

"Not in our world. I dare say in this neighbourhood there are a few with some standing."

"You have had no personal appeals made to you?"

"Many, but none which counted," and then Marriott dropped his voice to a whisper. "The escape of anyone you are interested in might be arranged."

"I might even contrive that without your assistance, eh, Marriott," laughed Rosmore. "He who holds the key can easiest open the door. Don't look so astonished, man. It is an open secret that, from the King downwards, personal aims enter into this rebellion. Jeffreys has his, a stretching out towards power; you have yours, which are no concern of mine; I have mine, which are nothing to you."

"You are too honest, and perhaps you bark too loudly," said the judge, glancing round the room.

"I take care to examine walls well before I live between them," said Rosmore; "but see for yourself. This curtain hangs before the door of my

bedroom, this before a window looking into a side street," and he drew the curtains aside for a moment to show that he spoke truly.

Marriott nodded and drank more wine.

"We can talk quite freely," said Rosmore, seating himself again at the table opposite to his guest. "There is a woman you have promised to help should she ask you."

"No; you are mistaken."

"Think, Marriott. The promise may have been made at Aylingford Abbey."

"Do you mean Mistress Lanison?"

Rosmore nodded his head slowly.

"Ah, yes, I did make some kind of promise," said Marriott. "A gallantry, Rosmore, and I would make my words good if I had the chance."

"And the bribe?" Rosmore asked.

"As you have just said, that can be no concern of yours."

"That is not so certain. It happens that you have the chance. Mistress Lanison is in Dorchester--a prisoner."

Marriott sprang to his feet.

"The devil! Who had her arrested?"

Rosmore shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not know, but the fact remains, she is a prisoner. This I can tell you, she journeyed to the West to appeal to you on behalf of Gilbert Crosby, and was arrested on the way."

"But Crosby has not been captured?"

"Don't you think you and I could make up our minds that he has?" said Rosmore.

"I do not see the necessity. My influence will have to be exerted to procure her release. I shall have kept my word, and--"

"And the reward?" asked Rosmore.

"It will not be so great that it will be beyond her power to pay," was the answer.

"Shall I make a guess?" said Rosmore. "If your influence is exerted, Barbara Lanison becomes the wife of Judge Marriott. Ah! I see I have hit near the mark. I have another plan. You shall write me two orders, one for the release of Mistress Lanison, the other for the release of Gilbert Crosby. The execution of these orders shall be at my discretion as to time. They may be given because of your love for her, if you will, but you must be self-sacrificing and claim no reward."

"My dear Rosmore, if you are serious, your impudence is colossal, if you

are in jest, I fail to see the point of it."

"I have not come to the point, for jest it is, and one you may profit by. Sit down again and fill your glass--we can enjoy the joke together. Although you do not ask for any reward, you get one--five hundred or a thousand guineas, the exact amount we can decide, but at any rate a goodly sum for two scraps of paper. I should advise you to close with such an offer."

"Still the jest does not appeal to me."

"No?"

"You want Mistress Lanison--"

"Released," Rosmore interrupted sharply.

"She shall be, but in my own fashion."

"In mine, I think," said Rosmore quietly.

Marriott rose to his feet again, his face purple with anger. A string of oaths and invectives poured suddenly from his lips.

"You are not in court, Marriott, and I am not a prisoner," said Rosmore quietly. "Do you happen to remember a prisoner who was tried some months ago? Was his name Josiah Popplewell?"

The judge was suddenly silent, and his purple face became livid.

"He was a rich merchant in the City, I fancy, full of crime and treason, and, moreover, very wealthy. His wealth was tempting to--let us say to those in high authority, and there was plenty of evidence against him, manufactured, perhaps, but still apparently irrefutable. At the crucial moment, however, there came forward a witness who, in the clearest manner, was able to prove that the evidence was false, and Popplewell got off. That is the case from the world's point of view. But there was another side to it. This witness was well paid, and by whom do you think? By the judge himself, who accepted an immense bribe from the prisoner. I wonder what the King would have to say if he knew, or in what estimation Judge Jeffreys would hold his learned brother? Do you remember the case?"

"A pretty story. I wonder if you could prove it?"

"Easily. The witness named Tarrant is in my employment. He declares that the judge made an effort to have him accidentally killed, not unwisely, perhaps, for the man has in his possession a scrap of writing which would ruin the judge."

"It is a lie."

"I have seen the writing," said Rosmore. "I could lay the case before Jeffreys whilst he is in Dorchester. That might make a sensation. Amongst the gibbeted wretches we might see hanging one of the judges who had been sent to punish them; that would be more original than a court hung with scarlet."

Marriott sat down slowly.

"Your glass is empty, let me fill it," said Rosmore. "Shall we say five hundred guineas for the two orders, no further questions asked, and presently, when the prisoners are in safety, the return of that incriminating scrap of paper?"

"You swear that--"

"My dear Marriott, I have not mentioned the name of the judge, why tell me what you chance to know of the story?"

"You shall have the orders," Said Marriott.

"Here are paper, ink, and pen."

Rosmore watched him as he wrote.

"Will that suffice?" Marriott asked.

"It is worded exactly as I would have it."

"So Mistress Lanison--"

"Did we not say no further questions?" asked Rosmore, smiling. "What should you say if I made a match between her and this notorious highwayman, Gilbert Crosby?"

"You must catch him first."

"Should you see him in Dorchester, you will do me a service by having him arrested. With this paper I can have him released at a convenient time. You are going? There is still wine in the bottle."

"Just enough for you to drink to the success of your night's work," said Marriott savagely.

"And to your health," Rosmore answered as he crossed the room with his guest.

As the door was closed, Harriet Payne took hold of the curtain to draw it aside, but paused in the act of doing so. Her eyes, wide open and fixed, stared at the curtains which hung on the opposite wall across the window. A hand, a man's hand, grasped them. Then they parted silently, and fell together again, slowly and silently.

Rosmore did not wish to be disturbed again, but the lock was stiff and the key difficult to withdraw. With a sigh of satisfaction he turned presently, but the Sigh became a sudden gasp of astonishment.

Against the background of the window curtains stood Gilbert Crosby!

CHAPTER XXII

THE LUCK OF LORD ROSMORE

Harriet Payne did not move. The curtain over the door concealed her, but it hung a little apart at one side, and she could see into the room, could see both men as they stood facing each other. For a while there was absolute silence, then Rosmore made a quick movement towards a side table on which lay a pistol.

"Stop, or you are a dead man!" said Crosby.

Rosmore stopped. He knew too much about his unwelcome guest to imagine that he would not be as good as his word. He paused a moment, then went to the table on which were the remains of the supper.

"I have no fear that you will shoot an unarmed man, Mr. Crosby," he said quietly. "I have heard many things against you, but never that you were a coward. I marvel that you have the courage to walk abroad in Dorchester, and wonder, even more, that you come into this room."

Crosby also walked to the table, and so they stood erect on either side of it, face to face, man to man, deadly enemies feeling each other's strength.

"We may come to the point at once, Lord Rosmore. Where is Mistress Barbara Lanison?"

"I hear that she is a prisoner in Dorchester."

"By your contriving."

"It is natural you should think so, seeing the position I hold in the West Country at the present time."

"I do not think, I know," Crosby answered. "By a trick, and through a lying messenger, you induced her to travel to Dorchester and had her arrested on the journey."

"Let us suppose this to be the case, is it not just possible that there may be a legitimate reason for such a trick?"

"I am ready to listen," said Crosby.

"Always supposing that your knowledge is correct, is it not possible that Mistress Lanison may foolishly believe herself enamoured of a certain somewhat notorious person, and that those who have her well-being at heart think it necessary to protect her from this notorious person until she becomes more sensible?"

Harriet Payne watched him as he spoke. There was a smile upon his handsome face such as any honest man's might wear when dealing with an excitable and imaginative opponent. Then, as Crosby spoke, she looked at him.

"I will tell you the truth," he said, speaking in a low, clear, and incisive tone. "You would yourself marry Barbara Lanison, and, having established a hold over her guardian, you have attempted to force her to such an alliance by threats. At every turn in the game you have been foiled. You have failed to impress Mistress Lanison; you failed in a villainous endeavour to defend her against a drunken man who was acting on your suggestion; you failed to capture me at Lenfield when you had no warrant but your own will for attempting such a capture."

"You have sat at the feet of an excellent tale-teller, sir, or else you have a prodigious imagination of your own."

Harriet Payne's eyes were fixed upon Rosmore. She watched him, and looked no more at Crosby.

"Failing in these endeavours, you made other schemes," Crosby went on. "Having taken a servant girl from Lenfield, you make use of her. She was an honest girl, I believe, not ill-intentioned towards me, but in your hands she was as clay. How you have deceived her, or what promises you have made to her, I do not know, I can only guess, but, to serve your own purposes, you have made a liar and a cheat of her. She has brought Mistress Lanison to Dorchester for you, that you may once more attempt to force a marriage which is distasteful to the lady. That is the story up to this moment."

"You appear to know the lady's secrets as well as mine."

"No, not as well as I know yours," Crosby answered. "Had I done so, I might have outwitted you and have prevented her coming to Dorchester."

"For a man who so easily believes every tale he hears, you are an exceedingly self-reliant person."

"And fortunate, too," said Crosby, "since I have an opportunity of showing you the end of the story."

"A prophet, by gad!" exclaimed Rosmore.

"I entered this room in time to hear your transaction with Judge Marriott," said Crosby. "Now the story ends in one of two ways. You have two orders of release, one for Mistress Lanison, one for me. I know their value, or you would not have been so anxious to get them, and I have at least one friend in Dorchester who can execute those orders without any question being raised. Those orders you will deliver to me, here and now."

"May I know how else the story might end?" Rosmore asked contemptuously.

"With your death," was the quiet answer. "Oh, no, not murder; death in fair fight. You are hardly likely to scream for help, I take it; you have yourself carefully locked the door, and no one is likely to pass along the alley outside that window. You may choose which way the story shall end."

"You so nearly make me laugh at you, Mr. Crosby, that I find the utmost difficulty in quarrelling with you. The orders I shall not part with, and I am half minded to call for help."

"You would not need it when it arrived," Crosby answered.

"And you would hang to-morrow."

"You have worked so secretly that I hardly think suspicion would fall upon me. I could go as quietly as I came, and no one be any the wiser."

"You shall be humoured, Mr. Crosby. I never thought to cross blades with a man ripe for Tyburn Tree, but the blade can be snapped afterwards."

"It is the way I should prefer the story to end," Crosby returned.

Rosmore pushed back the table, then the swords rang from their scabbards.

The girl behind the curtain did not move. She had watched Rosmore's face to try and learn whether Crosby's story were true. She travelled from doubt to belief, then back to doubt again, and now as the swords crossed she was fascinated, held there, it seemed, by some power outside herself, unable to move, powerless to cry out. She knew not what to believe. Lord Rosmore had not admitted the truth of the story, still he had not denied it. He had fenced with it. Harriet Payne had been at Lenfield long enough to understand the estimation in which her master, Gilbert Crosby, was held; he was not a man to lie deliberately, and she dared not face him, knowing the part she had played. She had played it because she loved this other man, but, dispassionately described as Crosby had told it, the offence she had committed seemed far greater than she had imagined. If Rosmore had deceived her! The thought burnt into her soul and sent the hot blood to her cheeks. Was she merely a silly wench, as were hundreds of others, won by a smooth tongue, stepping easily down into shame at the bidding of the first man whose words had enough flattery in them? Was there truth in what the trooper Watson had suggested? So, with her hand strained against her side, and leaning forward a little, she watched the play of the swords.

Rosmore was not smiling now. He was a master of fence, had proved it a dozen times, more than once had sent his man to his account. He had never yet faced an antagonist whose skill was quite equal to his own. Even to-night he would not admit to himself that he had found his equal. He remembered that he had drunk much wine, yet, before this, he had not fought the worse upon such a quantity. He had known sudden encounters over dice and cards when the settlement followed hard upon the quarrel, as well as more formal duels, and in none had he been beaten. Truly this Crosby was no mean opponent, but no glow of satisfaction at meeting a worthy foeman came to Lord Rosmore. This must be a fight to the death, and twice in quick succession he attempted a thrust, a famous thrust of his, which had so often carried death with it. Now it was parried, easily it seemed, and barely could he turn aside the answering point which flashed towards him. For a few moments he was entirely on the defensive, with never an opening to attack.

Gilbert Crosby's actual experience was not equal to his skill. Once only had he fought a duel, and had wounded his man on that occasion. He was confident of his skill as he faced Lord Rosmore, but he knew that he must lack something of that assurance which comes to the persistent duellist, that detachment of self which so often helps to victory. He was conscious of a certain anxiety which made him more than usually cautious. He fought as a man who must, not as one who glories in it, and it was well for Rosmore, perhaps, that it was so. It was for Barbara Lanison that he fought, the conviction in his mind that now or never must she be saved. No other way seemed open. It was of her he thought--of all she must have suffered, of the despicable trickery which had been practised upon her, of the fate which awaited her if she were not rescued. He loved her, that was as sure as that he lived, but it was not his love he thought of just then. As Rosmore once more attacked him fiercely the idea of defeat came to him for an instant. For himself he cared not, but what would it mean for her! The fight must end. It should end soon in the only possible way, honesty triumphant over villainy.

Lord Rosmore's thoughts wandered, too. The end did not really trouble him; he had never known defeat--why should it come to him now? Other men had parried a difficult thrust twice, and had failed to do so the third time; yet he remembered Barbara Lanison's speculation when he had spoken of breaking his sword after killing the highwayman. What would the highwayman do, she had wondered, if he should prove the victor, and Rosmore found himself wondering what Crosby would do in the event of such an end. Then he remembered Harriet Payne. What was the girl doing behind the curtain? Why had she not rushed into the room, as he had fully expected she would do? Had she swooned at the sight of the fighting? That he fought in an unrighteous cause he did not think about. For him right meant the attainment of what he desired, and his head was scheming as he parried Crosby's attack. The fight must end quickly. It was very certain that the wine he had taken was telling upon his endurance. He almost wished that the girl would scream for help; he was half inclined to call for it himself. It would be an easy way to bring the end. Lord Rosmore was not himself to-night.

Harriet stood motionless and watched. In her ignorance she thought that each thrust must end it, so impossible did it seem to turn aside, now this flashing blade, now that; but presently it was evident, even to her, that the fight was fiercer. The panting breaths came quicker, the blades rang more sharply. She wondered that the house had not been aroused, wondered that those passing in the streets had not heard this quarrel of steel with steel, and sought to know the reason. Then for the first time through long, long minutes her eyes wandered. The power which held her immovable and speechless was lessening, but the tension was not gone yet. Her eyes wandered, and her ears heard something besides the ringing steel. The curtains over the window shook a little, stirred by a breath of wind from the alley without. Then the window must have been left open! How was it no one without had heard the noise?

Crosby's back was to the window; he could not see that the curtains stirred, his ear caught no sound to startle him.

Rosmore, although he faced the window, saw nothing, heard nothing. His eyes were fixed upon those of his enemy, who was growing fiercer, more deadly every moment. The end was coming. Rosmore knew it, and felt weary. Every moment his enemy's point came nearer. It was parried this time and that, and again; but still it came. It touched him that time, not enough to scratch even, still it touched him! Next time! No, once more it was turned aside, and then it touched him again. It was nothing, but there was blood on his arm. In a moment that blade which had begun to dazzle him would be in his heart.

The curtains stirred again, floating out slightly into the room. Harriet's eyes turned to Rosmore, and saw the blood on his arm. She knew that this was the end. Then the curtains parted swiftly, and Crosby's blade fell with a clatter to the floor. For an instant he was struggling in the grasp of two men who had rushed upon him from behind, and was then borne to the ground. It was at this moment, too, that Harriet flung back the curtain from the door and stood in the room. Perhaps she expected Rosmore to make one late thrust at the falling man.

For a moment there was silence.

"Tie this handkerchief round my arm, mistress," said Rosmore; "the honours have gone against me."

She did as she was told.

"Shall we secure him, sir?"

"Yes, Sayers, but gently. I would not have him hurt. Forgive me, Crosby, I had no hand in this interruption; but, since it comes, I am glad to take advantage of it. What brought you here, Sayers?"

"Chance," was the answer. "We were wondering where the alley led to, saw the window unfastened, and heard the steel."

"Thank you, Harriet," said Rosmore, as she finished binding up his arm. "Help Mr. Crosby to a chair, Sayers. Give me that pistol on the table yonder. Here is the key of the door--catch; shut the window, one of you. Now go, and wait in the passage until I call you."

"Shall I go?" said Harriet.

"No; stay."

"You may well want to go, girl," said Crosby. "You have betrayed an innocent woman into the hands of her enemies, and for reward--what has this man promised you for reward?"

"Will you listen to me a moment, Mr. Crosby?" said Rosmore.

"Your confederates have made it impossible for me to refuse."

"That is unworthy of you," Rosmore answered. "I assure you I had no knowledge of their presence until I had made up my mind that your point was in my heart. I am glad they came for my own sake. I should have been a dead man had they been a moment later. I admit my defeat. Technically I am in your debt. If these bottles on the table are some excuse for me, I yet own that to-night the better man won."

"It hardly looks like it, does it?"

"Life is full of queer chances," said Rosmore, smiling. "You could find only two ways of ending your story. You see there is at least a third."

"It but delays the true ending," Crosby answered.

"No; believe me, I see in it a happy ending to the tale, but the tale is not quite as you imagine it. It is true that I take a sincere interest in Mistress Lanison, and I grieve to think that she has somewhat misjudged me, even as you have. You have also spoken some hard words against my valued companion here, Mistress Payne. Few men can see eye to eye, Crosby. You know Mistress Payne only as in your service--an honourable service, I know, yet one she was not intended for. I have seen her in different circumstances. Will you favour me by taking back the hard words you have said?"

"Yes, when she can prove her innocence, when she can prove that she has not betrayed another woman into your hands."

"I think I can prove that," said Rosmore. "Finding Mistress Payne here to-night may lead you to surmise many things. Strange to say, I was beginning to explain matters to her when we were interrupted, first by

Judge Marriott, then by you. That is so, is it not?"

"Yes," Harriet answered in a whisper.

"The explanation may be made for your benefit, too, Mr. Crosby, but first let me assure you that Barbara Lanison is a woman I would befriend, and is nothing more to me. Mistress Payne has done me the honour to see in me a worthy man. As soon as this detestable work of taking inhuman revenge on poor peasants is over, Mistress Payne will become Lady Rosmore--my wife."

CHAPTER XXIII

LORD ROSMORE AS A FRIEND

A wave of colour swept into Harriet's face as Rosmore turned to her with a smile. Doubt and uncertainty had been hers a moment ago, and the sting of Crosby's words had hurt her; now this open declaration clothed her with a pleasant confusion, vindicated her presence in these rooms, and it was natural, perhaps, that there should be gratification in her heart that her former master should understand how important a person she had become.

Crosby remained silent. Was Rosmore speaking the truth? Could such a man marry such a woman? It seemed impossible, and yet where love rules the impossible constantly happens. He had grown so used to seeing Harriet Payne a serving maid at his manor at Lenfield that he had thought of her in no other position. As he looked at her now, standing with her hand in Rosmore's, he was bound to admit that she made a pretty figure, that many an eye might turn upon her with pleasure, that she certainly looked something more than a mere serving maid.

"Have you no congratulations to offer, Mr. Crosby?" said Rosmore. "Will you not withdraw some of the hard words you have spoken against this lady?"

"I cannot forgive even your future wife for deceiving Mistress Lanison."

"You will presently, when you understand that Mistress Lanison has been saved from the intrigues of her uncle and guardian. For the rest, her happiness lies chiefly in your hands, and you may find me more useful as a living friend than I should have proved as a dead enemy. Gad! you look as if you doubted it. No man is such a villain as he is painted, and, being a lover myself, I sympathise with all lovers. Perhaps you are right to be cautious, wise not to trust me until I have proved myself. For a day or two you must be my guest, and you will forgive me if I, too, am cautious. You know my position in the West, and, truth to tell, I have used it in somewhat unwarrantable fashion on Mistress Lanison's behalf. I cannot afford to let you loose in Dorchester while you still think me an enemy. You must not blame me, then, if I have you guarded so that you must remain my guest even against your will. It will only be for a day or two. To-morrow we will go into my scheme in detail, and in the meanwhile I would remind you that your capture would rejoice the hearts of many. You will be wise to accept quietly the asylum I offer you in this house."

"I hope I shall live to thank you for your generosity," said Crosby.

"Indeed, I hope so," Rosmore answered, and he called to the men who were waiting without. "Make Mr. Crosby comfortable in one of the rooms upstairs. He is my guest, Sayers, and is to be well treated. That I have such a visitor is not to be spoken of, but you must see that he remains my guest. I do not ask for your parole, Mr. Crosby, because I do not believe you would give it, but I ask you to be wise for--for the sake of Mistress Lanison. Unfasten those bonds, Sayers--we do not keep prisoners here."

"I do not understand you, Lord Rosmore," said Crosby, standing up. "It may be that I shall know you better to-morrow."

"You will have slept, I trust, and clearer vision often comes with the new day. Good-night."

With a slight inclination of the head Crosby left the room with his two gaolers, for gaolers they surely were, although he had been called a guest. One of the triple alliance had grievously failed in his endeavour to help the woman who was in such sore distress; would the others fail as ignominiously?

"Are you satisfied?" asked Rosmore, turning to Harriet. "This pretty head of yours must have thought of hating me as you heard my character so basely spoken of."

"I am a woman, and was suspicious."

"And now, though still a woman, have no evil thoughts about me. I warrant you, this fellow Crosby will hardly be gracious enough to thank me when I place the woman he loves in his arms."

"You have not told me your scheme." "Scheme!" Rosmore exclaimed. "My head is full of schemes, and one comes uppermost at this moment. It is natural since it concerns you. I cannot let you serve another any longer. There are many rooms in this house; you shall stay here. Nay, let this kiss stop all remonstrance. I will send at once for some decent woman in the town who shall be your maid for the present, and Mistress Lanison shall have someone to wait on her in your place. I cannot have the lady who is to be my wife stooping even to serve Mistress Lanison. Rosmores ever looked eye to eye with their fellows, and long ancestry and loyalty have given them privileges even in the presence of the King. Are you angry that I already teach you something of what my love means?"

"Angry? No; proud."

"Come, then. Let us see what is the best this house can do for you."

"Am I to be guarded like your other guest?" she asked demurely.

"Aye, far more strongly guarded, for at every exit Love shall stand sentinel."

She leaned towards him, and he kissed her again, even as a man will kiss the woman he worships. Then they went out.

Barbara Lanison was sorely troubled when Harriet Payne did not return.

The girl had gone to try once more to get speech with Judge Marriott, and her mistress waited for her impatiently. So much depended on her success, and never for a single instant had Barbara doubted her loyalty. As the hours passed and the girl did not return she grew anxious. The town was in the hands of rough soldiers, whose licence, if even half the stories she had heard were true, had gone unpunished. The officers were no better than their men, and there must be a thousand dangers for a girl like Harriet Payne in the streets of Dorchester. Barbara blamed herself for letting her run into such danger, and, as she thought more of her, thought less of the mission upon which she had sent her.

It was late when the door opened and Watson came in. Barbara had crossed the room hurriedly, supposing that it was Harriet, but stopped, seeing who her visitor was.

"I have just heard that your maid will not return," Said Watson.

"Where is she?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"How can I know? She has probably found freedom more attractive than this place."

"Tell me the truth," said Barbara.

"I know no more than that she will not return. That was the bald message she sent, with a suggestion that someone else must be found to serve you. To-night, it is too late to search the town for a woman willing to undertake the duty, but to-morrow--"

"I want no other maid," said Barbara. "There is some reason why the girl does not return to me, and you know that reason."

"I can guess."

"It is easy to understand," Barbara returned. "The streets of Dorchester are not safe for any honest woman to-day."

"That may be so, madam, but I do not think it is the reason of Mistress Payne's desertion. I think fear has stepped in. At the best she did not seem to me a courageous person, at the worst she would be an easy coward. At any moment Judge Jeffreys may arrive in the town, and it would seem that he has less pity on those who help rebels than on the rebels themselves; I think that is why your maid does not return."

Barbara did not answer. The coming of Judge Jeffreys must seal the fate of Gilbert Crosby. So important a prisoner would be quickly tried and speedily executed. Her mission had failed.

"Yes, I believe that is the reason," Watson went on after a pause. His conscience awoke for a moment and pricked him sharply, but the breaking of this woman's spirit meant money in his pocket, and his manner of life had made him an easy victim to such a temptation. Had Barbara shown fear and pleaded with him, she might have prevailed and gained a friend; as she did not, the man found a certain brutal satisfaction in doing his best to destroy her courage by carrying out his master's instructions. "I have no doubt that is the reason," he repeated with some emphasis, "and I hardly care to blame her. It is a good thing to keep out of the

way of Judge Jeffreys. Have you heard about Lady Alice Lisle and what they did to her lately at Winchester?"

"I have heard of her," said Barbara.

"She was no rebel, I take it," said Watson, "She only assisted a couple of fugitives, and for that paid the penalty."

Barbara looked at him questioningly, and he entered into details, sparing her nothing of the history of this fiendish judicial murder, and contrived to let her see that her own case was not unlike Lady Lisle's. Barbara did not move, uttered no sound during the recital. When Watson had finished she looked at him.

"It is a marvel to me that rebellion has been confined to the West," she said quietly. "Were I a strong man, I should be in revolt at such injustice."

"You would be as others, afraid to speak."

"There are some who are not afraid," she answered.

"Aye, and will dangle from a gibbet for their pains. May a rough trooper give you a word of advice?"

She bowed her head slowly.

"If you have friends, make petition to them," said Watson. "Be humble, and endeavour to escape standing before Judge Jeffreys."

"Can you tell me of what I shall be accused?" Barbara asked.

"No, but means will be found to destroy you. I hear the gossip, and I draw my conclusions."

"Can you suggest anyone to whom I can apply?"

Watson had no suggestion to make, but he promised that any message she might send should be delivered.

"I thank you for the advice and for the promise," said Barbara. "I can think of no friend in Dorchester, and I am not sure that being a rebel is not the more honourable position to-day."

"It means death."

"Well? Are there not worse things than death?"

"Truly, I think not. From all other ills a man may perchance recover, but from death--never."

Barbara smiled. It was not likely that this man would understand.

"Think over my advice to-night," said Watson. "There are many in Dorchester who might help you. Think to-night, and give me the names of some friends to-morrow. I shall know whether they are in the town, and would help you. To-morrow also I will seek for a new maid to serve you."

"Spare yourself that trouble," Barbara said as he went to the door. "So

short a service as I shall require is not worth anyone's taking."

Watson was a soldier, and in his way a good soldier. He would have faced death at a moment's notice so long as he was well paid for doing so, and would be loyal to those he served, unless perchance a very heavy bribe were offered him and there was a reasonable probability of safety in accepting it. He had risen to some authority amongst his fellows, and did not think meanly of himself. He was convinced that his treatment of Barbara Lanison had been diplomatic, whereas his whole manner and conversation had put her upon her guard. He had succeeded in convincing her that he was laying a trap for her indiscretion, and that to trust him would be only playing into the hands of her enemies. In the morning she had thought of no friend to mention to him, and had decided not to trust him even with a message to Judge Marriott. Such a message was more likely to be used against her than on her behalf. Shrugging his shoulders, Watson departed, and did not disturb her again until the evening. Then he entered the room quietly, and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"I have found you a friend," he said, "a powerful friend who runs some risk to serve you. Take my advice, and treat him courteously."

"Who is he?"

Watson did not answer, but went to the door. A closely-cloaked figure entered, and Watson went out, closing the door. Then the cloak was thrown back.

"Lord Rosmore!" Barbara exclaimed.

"At your service, but speak low. I come secretly. This trooper found me out, but I had already been scheming on your behalf. He was able to help me in my one remaining difficulty."

She drew back from him.

"I have not asked for your help," she said.

"I know. You have misunderstood me, Mistress Lanison, and I grant you have had some reason. I would have won you if I could, and, as many another lover has done, I have thought all ways honest. I was wrong. I ask your pardon."

"What is the purpose of this visit?" she asked. She knew that she was a helpless prisoner, she knew that this man was powerful in the West, yet she stood before him, looking straight into his eyes, defying him to frighten her or to bend her to his will.

"To help you."

"I have no need of your help," she answered.

"I have more than words to prove my sincerity, yet I would justify myself a little. I have loved you; even now I may think that your coming to the West was foolish, that the man you have jeopardised yourself to save is hardly worthy, but--"

"You have beaten me, Lord Rosmore," said Barbara quietly. "I am convinced that I owe my position here in Dorchester to you and to my

uncle. It may save you trouble and time if I tell you that your success ends here. I would rather die the death of a traitor than marry you."

"I know that," he returned just as quietly. "Love plays the fool with us all, even making Mistress Lanison of Aylingford Abbey fall a victim to the worship of a highwayman. To help him you are even willing to sacrifice yourself to a brute like Judge Marriott."

"I have indeed been betrayed by those I trusted," said Barbara.

"It is the common fortune, and help conies, as it often does, from those we distrust and hate," was the answer. "Marriott would have let you sacrifice yourself, but he would have done little else. It makes me sick to think that I should have a rival in such a man. But let that pass. You were doomed to failure, for it is my business to know everything that happens in the West just now."

"Again I say, Lord Rosmore, that between us there can be no terms."

"Still, you must listen to me; so far you are in my power. Your infatuation for Galloping Hermit seemed to me so impossible a thing that I confess I have done my utmost to save you. You are not to be saved; therefore I will help you. What your sacrifice could never have done, my knowledge of Marriott's vile character has accomplished. I have in my possession two orders--one for your release, one for the release of Gilbert Crosby."

A quick intake of her breath showed Barbara's sudden excitement. For an instant the good news was everything, the next moment she remembered from whom it came. Either the news was untrue, or there would be conditions.

"I can see that you do not trust me," said Rosmore, reading the look in her eyes. "These are the orders signed by Judge Marriott."

She looked at the papers which he held out.

"Even these shall not tempt me to make terms."

"There are no conditions except that you and your lover leave Dorchester--together," he said with a short laugh. "He will probably hasten to get out of the country as soon as possible, since he has become too notorious to live in it in safety, unless he still prefers the excitement of the road to the quiet peacefulness of your love."

"Is this some new trickery?" she asked.

"Perhaps there is some little revenge in it," he answered. "There comes a time when a scorned lover may cease to care for the woman who flouts him, and will remember that the world holds fairer women. When he finds this fairer love he is happy, but a spirit of retaliation may remain. I think this is my case. To be the wife of a notorious highwayman would not appeal to many women; most women would prefer to be Lady Rosmore, whatever the drawbacks to such a position might be. Mistress Lanison will go her own way, and I should be more than human if I did not hope that she may live to regret it. There is no trickery, and no condition except that you leave Dorchester together. Once safely in his hands, I can trust Gilbert Crosby not to let you escape him."

"I ought to thank you, Lord Rosmore, but--"

"But you may live to curse me for my help. It is possible, probable even. You have three days to think it over. Escape will not be possible until then."

"There is some scheme against me," said Barbara passionately. "You and my guardian have--"

"I said I had more than words to prove my sincerity," said Rosmore, going to the door. He went out. "I will give you an hour," Barbara heard him say, and then another closely-cloaked figure entered and the door was shut and locked.

"Gilbert!" she cried, and the next moment she was sobbing in his arms.

CHAPTER XXIV

LOVE AND FEAR

Gilbert!

It was the first time she had called him by his name, and surely on her lips there was unexpected music in it. She had come into his arms and, with a sob, had nestled there as if she had found safety and content. Her face was hidden against him, and he kissed her hair reverently, not daring to attempt to turn her face to him. His possession of her was so sudden that he was as a man who dreams a dream, half conscious that it is a dream, which he would not have broken. Until he was in the room Crosby could not believe that the promise which Rosmore had made would be fulfilled. He could not believe that Barbara was close to him, that he would see her. He had listened to Rosmore as he unfolded his scheme for their escape, trying to detect the direction of his villainy, never for an instant believing that he was sincere; and, after all, he had done as he had promised, he had brought him to Barbara Lanison. The woman he loved was in his arms. It was wonderful, wonderfully true! The rest would happen in its due time. Life with love in it was to be his. The man he hated had proved a friend. So he kissed the beautiful fair hair and waited for Barbara to look up, that he might read her heart through her eyes and kiss her lips.

Barbara did not look up. Almost unasked she had crept into the arms that opened to her, quickly and without question. From the first moment she had seen Gilbert he had been more to her than any other man, and, if she had not dared to admit it even to herself, she knew she loved him. Had she not come to the West to save him? Had she not been ready to sacrifice herself for him? She, too, had placed no trust in Lord Rosmore, yet the unexpected had happened. He had brought Gilbert Crosby to her. They were to escape together. She and Galloping Hermit, the notorious wearer of the brown mask, were to go together! He was a man, a true man, she had said it, she meant it, but--Ah, strive to forget them as she would, Rosmore's words had left a sting behind them. For all he was a man, he was a highwayman, and she was Barbara Lanison, of Aylingford Abbey! She did not look up as she gently disengaged herself from his arms.

"Tell me everything," she said quietly. "We have only an hour. I heard him tell you so when you came in."

If Crosby was disappointed, if at that moment the desire to hold her in his arms and kiss her lips was almost beyond his control, he let her go without protest. It was for him to do her will, and how should he, who had never squandered spurious love, know the ways of a woman with a man. She sat down, leaning a little forward in her chair, her hands clasped in her lap. She did not look at him as he stood beside her, telling her shortly and quickly what he had done in the West. He told her how Martin Fairley had found him in the wood, and how they had come to Dorchester on the night of her capture.

"You had not been a prisoner at all?" she asked.

"No, you were brought to the West by a lie; but I shall never forget that you came, and why you came. What did you think you could do?"

"I thought I could help you."

"How?"

"Judge Marriott had once made me a promise that if I asked him he would contrive the escape of anyone I--anyone I was interested in."

"Such a man would not make a promise for nothing."

"No."

"What was his reward to be?"

"I hoped he would let me off," Barbara said, covering her face with her hands, "but he wanted me to marry him. That would have been his price, and I should have paid it."

"Oh, my dear, don't you know I would rather have died a score of deaths?"

"And then, when you came to Dorchester?" she asked. She did not look at him; her head was lowered and her hands clasped in her lap again.

"We tried to find you, Martin and Fellowes and I."

"Sydney Fellowes?" she said.

"It was a triple alliance," said Crosby. "What the others have done since I parted with them I do not know. I sought out Rosmore," and then he told her of the duel and of Harriet Payne. "I should have killed him that night had we been undisturbed a moment longer, and then I might never have found you."

"Harriet Payne to be Lady Rosmore, is it possible?" said Barbara. "Do you suppose Lord Rosmore is honest with her or with us?"

"How can I think otherwise now? He has brought me to you when he could so easily have kept us apart. Why should he not fulfil the rest of his promise?"

"Has he told you his scheme?" she asked.

"Yes. In three days we are to leave Dorchester together. I shall wait with a coach just outside the town, on the road which leads down to the River Frome, and you are to join me there. It is not far from this house, and you will be safely guarded on your way to me. Then--"

Crosby paused, hoping to see her look up with the light of love in her eyes. She remained with her head lowered.

"Then we shall be free," he said. "And it is for you to command which road we take, and how far we journey upon it together."

She moved a little restlessly. In this one short hour, which was slipping away so fast, she had to decide upon what her future was to be. She loved, but she was the daughter of a proud race, whose blood mingled with the best blood of which England could boast. The man beside her was more to her than any other man could ever be, yet he was the highwayman, "Gallop Hermit," the notorious wearer of the brown mask, the man upon whose head a price was set, and who would surely perish miserably at Tyburn if he fell into the hands of his enemies. Great provocation might have made him a knight of the road, romance had succeeded in setting him apart from his brethren, but was she justified in loving such a man, could she give herself into his keeping? And she dared not tell him all that was in her heart, for she knew instinctively how he would answer her. She knew that he would sacrifice himself for her without a moment's hesitation; she believed that, without her, life would be of little worth to him. Their love was a strange thing, binding them together in silence. He had never said that he loved her; knowing what he was he had not dared to speak, perhaps, yet he had opened his arms and she had gone to him without a question. What words were needed to tell such a love as this? Her lover must be saved at any cost, and afterwards--

The silence seemed long as these thoughts sped through her mind. She was conscious that his eyes were fixed upon her, felt that he understood something of the doubts which troubled her.

"I do not trust Lord Rosmore," she said.

"Nor should I if I could conceive any advantage he could gain from his present action," Crosby answered. "He knows that I am a valuable prisoner. He might reasonably hope that he is now in a position to bring pressure upon you. He and I have stood face to face, letting cold steel settle our quarrel. I say it not boasting, but I should have killed him. He admitted defeat, although I was robbed of victory. Under all the evil that is in him may there not be some generosity? I am inclined to think this is his reason for helping us."

"He gave me another reason," said Barbara quietly.

"Tell me."

"Revenge. I should live to regret leaving Dorchester with Gilbert Crosby, who would never let me go, once I was in his hands. I have scorned him for a--"

"For me," said Crosby. "True, I have no such name as Rosmore has, I cannot offer you a tithe of what he can give you. My most precious possession is my love, but in love he is bankrupt beside my wealth."

True, too, that I will not easily let you go, but you shall choose your own path. We will seek safety together, and then--then if along the road I would have you take you see difficulties and dangers, if in your mind there stands a single shadow which you fear, you shall take your own way unhindered and alone. If you will it, I will pass out of your life and you shall never hear of me again. Can you not trust me?"

"You know I do; you should not even ask the question, but--ah, Gilbert, cannot you understand the trouble that is mine?"

"Yes, dearest; I know, I know," he said, falling on his knees beside her. "Chance brought me into your life, chance gave us a few sweet hours together, yet how little can you know of me. We are not like other lovers who have told each other their secrets, who have dreamed long dreams together. Only to-night you have been in my arms for the first time. I have never told you that I love you, yet you know it."

"Yes, I know it," she whispered.

"And yet you are afraid. I do not blame you, my dearest; you know so little about me, but you shall question me once we are free."

"And you will answer all my questions?"

"All of them, even if the answer should bring a blush of shame to my cheek," he said.

"And if--if I asked you to give up something, to begin a new life, to forsake old friends, old associations?"

"I shall live only for you," he said.

Then for the first time she looked straight into his eyes. What was the question in them? She was waiting, for some answer--what was it?

"You must be lenient with me," he said. "When a man answers all a woman's questions, it is because he worships her, only because of that, and then he understands how poor a thing, how unworthy he is. I shall answer them all, you must be lenient and forgive."

She still looked at him, but did not speak.

"I may argue with you, use all the power I have to win your forgiveness, use all the depths of my love to show you that our way henceforth must be together. Be sure I shall not easily let you go. Rosmore was wrong, you shall be free to choose; but I will use every artifice I have to make you choose to stay with me. It has never seemed to me that words were necessary. Love came to me as the sunshine and the wind come, given to me, a free gift from Heaven. One moment I was without it, ignorant of it, and the next it was a part of my life. Before, to live had seemed a great thing, to be a man, to do a man's work was enough; afterwards, life could not be life without love. Rob me of love now, and you leave me nothing."

"When was the moment, Gilbert?"

"When I saw you shrinking from the crowd as it poured out of Newgate," he whispered.

"Even then?" she said.

"Yes; and I did not know who you were, Barbara. It did not seem to matter. Love had come--I thought to us both. I could not understand that it should come to me so suddenly, so wonderfully, and not come to you also. A little waiting, and then you would be mine. It must happen so. And then came my token and talisman. See how close it has clung to me."

With fingers that trembled a little, he drew out the white ribbon which was fastened about his neck. She touched it, looked at it and at him.

"It fell from your throat, or waist, when you moved to come with me. I caught it as it fluttered to the ground and hid it. I have worn it ever since. I have kissed it night and morning, and it has brought the vision of you to my waking eyes and into my dreams. I have seen you going from room to room in my old home at Lenfield, I have seen you descending the stairs, so vividly that I have found myself holding out my arms to you. Sometimes when the days were dark, and I was troubled, an awful sadness has crept into my soul. Doubts have come. Should I ever see you in those rooms, on those stairs? And then, dearest, I have touched this ribbon and hope has come again like sunshine after storm. Aye, you shall question me as you will, but be very sure I shall not easily let you go."

Barbara stood up suddenly. Her hands were in his, and she made him rise from his knees. She stood before him, her eyes looking into his.

"And, Gilbert, when you have ridden in the night, alone, have you thought of me then?"

"Since love came I have never ridden alone," he answered. "No matter if the stars were clear, or the night had wind and rain in it, you have been beside me. At times, lately, a hundred difficulties have stood in my path. It seemed impossible that I could win safety for some poor wretch of a fugitive, so impossible that I might have given up the task in despair only that you seemed to speak to me, encouraging me. No; I have never been alone since love came."

"I am glad," she said.

"And you love me, Barbara?"

"Yes--yes, I must love you, I cannot help it, but--" and then she stopped, for there were sounds of footsteps in the passage. "Is the hour gone so soon? Kiss me, Gilbert; I love you. No matter who you are, or what you have done, I love you. I am yours, always; no other shall kiss me or hold me in his arms. But, remember, I have your promise, I may take which road I choose, alone and unhindered if I will it so," and then, as the door opened, she pushed him gently from her, and they were standing apart when Rosmore entered.

"It has seemed a long hour, Mistress Lanison, to a waiting man. To you--"

"Long enough to hear the plan you have made for my escape," said Barbara.

"For your escape and Mr. Crosby's," said Rosmore, laying some stress upon his words.

"For which we both thank you," she went on. "For my part I have had, perhaps, unjust thoughts concerning you, your present generosity makes me understand that in many ways I have misjudged you. Please forgive me."

"You certainly have misjudged me in many ways, Mistress Lanison, and, as I have said, you may not have much cause to thank me for what I do now."

"I have decided to run the risk."

"You have yet three days in which to alter your decision if you so wish," Rosmore returned. "The delay is necessary. The road will be freer and safer then, and the town too much occupied with Judge Jeffreys to pay much attention to anyone else. Mr. Crosby has told you the place of meeting. The trooper Watson will follow you and see you safely into Mr. Crosby's company, and then freedom and happiness. Until then you must not meet. I must think of myself, and bringing Mr. Crosby here is a risk. Should you, even at the eleventh hour, change your mind, I will let Mr. Crosby know. Once upon the road, no one is likely to stop you, especially if you go southwards, as I presume you will; but in case of accident, there is Judge Marriott's order for your release. With that in your possession, I know of none who would refuse to let you pass."

Barbara took the paper.

"And there is your order, Mr. Crosby. It is time we went. Your servant, Mistress Lanison," and Rosmore bent low over her hand.

"Thank you," she said in a whisper. Crosby in his turn bent over her hand, his lips touching it.

"Until you come to me," he said, "God keep you."

A swift pressure of his fingers was her only answer. Then the door opened and shut again, the key was turned in the lock, and she was alone.

As Gilbert Crosby had been brought there, in a coach and blindfolded, so he left, and went back with Lord Rosmore to his lodgings.

"In view of your kindness in helping us, the bandage hardly seemed necessary," said Crosby, as he took it off, when they had entered Rosmore's room, the same room in which they had fought.

"You might grow weary of waiting, and attempt to see her. Lovers are like that, and often spoil the best-laid schemes," Rosmore laughed. "Oh, I am thinking chiefly of myself. Jeffreys has no profound love for me, and would rejoice to catch me tripping. You are no longer my guest, Mr. Crosby. I have done my part, and your presence here is a danger to me. You are free to go. Perhaps you had better tell me where you are to be found during the next three days. Women are sometimes as changeful as a gusty wind, and Mistress Lanison might alter her decision."

Although astonished at being set at liberty at once, Crosby was not so off his guard as to mention "The Anchor" in West Street. He gave the address of Fellowes' lodging. It was the only other place he knew where a message could reach him.

"Good-bye, then," said Rosmore. "You will be wise to keep within doors until you leave Dorchester for good. There are many who know Gilbert Crosby, and once in the hands of Jeffreys you would have short shrift."

"Thank you. I shall take care. I believe you have proved a friend, Lord Rosmore," and Crosby held out his hand.

For a moment Rosmore hesitated.

"No; we will not shake hands," he said. "If I have found consolation, I cannot forget who you are and that you have robbed me of Mistress Lanison. To clasp your hand would mean to wish you good luck, and I cannot do that. I want her to know that she has chosen badly. You and I could never be friends, Mr. Crosby."

"As you will; yet I would repay your kindness if ever the opportunity should offer."

Rosmore shrugged his shoulders as he crossed the room and Crosby went out, Sayers joining him in the passage and seeing that no one hindered his going.

For a few minutes Rosmore remained in deep thought, and then Harriet Payne came in.

"You look strangely ill-tempered," was her greeting.

"My face must be a poor index to my thoughts," he answered, with quick yet forced gaiety. "I have just finished a good work."

"What is that?"

"Making two people happy. Come and kiss me, and I'll tell you all about it." Yet all her kisses and arts of pleasing could not keep the thoughtfulness out of his face as he told her how Barbara Lanison and Gilbert Crosby were to leave Dorchester together.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TRIPLE ALLIANCE

There was little danger of anyone recognising Gilbert Crosby as he passed through the streets of the town. A swinging lantern might illumine his face for a moment, or the beam of light from some unshuttered window might have betrayed him to some watching enemy, but everyone in the houses and in the streets had enough to think about to-night. Judge Jeffreys had come to Dorchester. To-morrow his ferocious voice would be dooming dozens to death in that court with the scarlet hangings. The Bloody Assizes would have commenced in earnest, and there were few families in Dorchester which had not one relative or friend waiting in the prisons to be tried for rebellion. There was already mourning in the city, and the soldiers were in readiness lest desperation should drive to riot. Crosby might have gone with less care than he did and yet passed unnoticed.

In the upper room at "The Anchor" he found Fellowes, who sprang up at his entrance.

"Gad! I had lost all hope," he exclaimed. "I have been searching the town for you. I thought Rosmore must have caught you."

"He did. A miracle has happened. Where is Fairley?"

"I have not seen him since we parted the other night," Fellowes answered. "I have picked up some information, but have had no one to tell it to."

"And I have seen Mistress Lanison."

"Seen her!"

"Seen her and spoken to her. It is a miracle, I tell you." And Crosby gave him the history of his dealings with Lord Rosmore, omitting no detail from the moment he had stepped into the room and overheard part of the conversation with Judge Marriott to his leaving Rosmore's lodging less than an hour ago.

"It is well that you did not tell him of this place," said Fellowes.

"You do not trust him?"

"No. Do you?"

"I cannot see how he is possibly to profit out of such a plan," said Crosby.

"The devil tempts in the same way," answered Fellowes. "If we could always see through the devil's plans we should less often fall a victim to his wiles. If an angel came and bid me trust Rosmore, I should have no faith in the angel."

"Let us find the weak places in the scheme if we can," said Crosby.

"There is one I see at once," said Fellowes. "You are taken blindfold to Mistress Lanison's prison. You do not know in what part of the town she is. You cannot watch the house. Why the delay of three days?"

"I am inclined to think Rosmore has been generous this time," Crosby persisted.

"If by some strange chance he has, there are three days in which he may repent of his generosity," was the answer. "I have seen Marriott. He told me of his interview with Rosmore, and that the orders had been stolen from him, he did not explain how. Rosmore has no fiercer enemy at the moment than the judge. Marriott knew nothing of Mistress Lanison's capture; indeed, he declared that he did not believe she was in Dorchester. One thing he was certain of, that Rosmore intended to force her to marry him."

"How?"

"Perhaps by letting her appear before Jeffreys, allowing her to be accused and condemned, and then rescuing her at his own price. This is Marriott's idea."

"She would not pay the price."

"And I fear Marriott would not be powerful enough to save her, although he says he could, if Rosmore took this course. The outlook is black, man, black as hell, and only one feeble ray of light can I bring into it. Marriott has promised to help me to open her prison doors should she be condemned. To his own undoing I believe he will keep that promise, so great is his hatred of Rosmore."

"What can we do?" said Crosby, pacing the room with short, nervous strides. "It is damnable to be so helpless."

"Wait; there is nothing else to do. Marriott is doing his best to find out where Mistress Lanison is imprisoned. He is to let me know. If we can find that out we may yet beat this devil Rosmore."

"He may be honest in this," said Crosby.

"We will have the coach waiting," Fellowes answered, "but I do not believe Rosmore is ever going to help you to use it. I wish Martin were here."

"Where can he have gone?"

"Working somewhere for his mistress," said Fellowes. "That is certain unless he is dead. You recollect he said he had a half-formed scheme in his mind. Next morning I found a message here that he might be absent for a day or two."

"Some forlorn hope," said Crosby.

"Perhaps, but Martin's forlorn hopes have a way of proving useful. You will lie low here, I suppose, Crosby? I will get back to my lodgings, and if I hear from Marriott I will come to you at once--or from Rosmore. It may be part of his design to make you think Mistress Barbara has changed her mind."

"If he sent such a message I should know he was lying."

"Don't leave here, Crosby. Much may depend on my being able to find you at a moment's notice, and Martin may return at any time. You and I have only discovered how great our difficulties are. Let us hope Martin will have found the way out of them."

Would he? Crosby wondered, when he was left alone. In what direction could Martin be seeking a solution to the problem? Not in Dorchester, surely, or he would have come to the "Anchor" tavern. Where else? In London? At Aylingford? Yes, perhaps at Aylingford; an appeal to Barbara's guardian. If Martin Fairley had attempted such a forlorn hope as this it was unlikely that he would bring much help with him when he returned. Hour after hour Crosby sat there alone, now staring vacantly at the opposite wall, now pacing the narrow room like a caged and impotent animal. The dawn found him asleep in his chair.

News travelled slowly. Messengers, with instructions not to spare their horses, might ride to London, to the King at Whitehall, yet Lady Lisle had been executed at Winchester before the story of her trial was known in parts of Hampshire even. If one were far from the main road, where

news might be had from the driver or guard of a coach, information could only come from some wandering pedlar to a remote village, and might or might not be true. Vague stories were told, and forgotten as soon as told. Men and women, with a hard living to earn, cared little what was happening fifty or a hundred miles away, unless a son or brother or friend had had part in the rebellion. At the village of Aylingford no one appeared to have this personal interest, and they were ignorant of the fact that at least one messenger had ridden to the Abbey with news for Sir John. He had come at nightfall, had been with Sir John for an hour, and had then departed. He had not lingered in the servants' quarters to whisper something of his news, nor had Sir John mentioned his coming to his guests. There were not many guests at Aylingford just now, and Mrs. Dearmer yawned openly, and confessed herself bored. She seemed to have taken up her abode permanently at the Abbey, playing the hostess, and to some extent ruling Sir John.

"I vow, Abbot, you're less lively than a ditch in a dry summer," she said to him the day after the messenger had been.

"What shall we do to make us merry? You have only to command," he answered.

"Plague on it, I am at a loss to know. In all our present company there's not a wit worth listening to, nor a woman with sufficient vice or virtue to make her interesting. I feel like turning saint for the sake of a new sensation."

"There are some things even you cannot do, and turning saint is one of them."

"I would have said as much for you," she returned. "But this morning your face has already begun to play the part. It might belong to the painted window of a chapel."

"Is it so uninteresting?" laughed Sir John. "Truly, you and I must devise some wickedness to pass the time until kindred spirits return to the Abbey. Half the monks of Aylingford are in the West, and the nuns find it dull without them."

"Next week we will go to town," said Mrs. Dearmer. "I love you, Abbot John, with all the wickedness that is in me, but truly you have grown dull lately."

No one was better qualified to pass judgment on Sir John than Mrs. Dearmer. To her he was dull, perhaps the worst crime a man can be guilty of in the eyes of such a woman, yet the accusation did not trouble him now as much as it would have done at another time. He was restless, and if his conscience was too moribund to have the power of pricking, he had become introspective. Fear and superstition took hold of him, and he could not shake himself free. The news which the messenger had brought him was good news, yet, even as the man had delivered it, a candle had guttered and gone out, and Sir John saw a warning of disaster in the fact. He was constantly on the watch for such omens, and saw them within the house and without. He met a new kitchen wench who looked at him with eyes askew, sure sign of evil. Three crows with flapping wings settled at dusk upon the terrace wall and called to him as he passed. A vase of quaint workmanship, brought from the East Indies by his brother, Barbara's father, split suddenly in twain, and Sir John trembled as with an ague at so sure a premonition of evil as this. There were moments

when he could not bear to be shut in a room, when the confinement between four walls seemed to stifle him, and like a half suffocated man he would stagger on to the terrace and gasp for breath.

He promised Mrs. Dearmer that next week he would go with her to town, and all that day he tried to prove that he was not dull. The effort was successful until the evening, and then came the feeling of suffocation and the need for deep draughts of air. With a muttered excuse he left his guests to their play and laughter, and hurried to the terrace.

The night was still, not a breeze stirred in the trees, and the light of a young moon was upon the terrace, casting faint, motionless shadows over greensward and stone flags. For a little while Sir John stood looking down into the stream, which seemed asleep to-night. Upon it the shadows quivered, but scarce a ripple of music came from underneath its banks. A man might well feel some regrets for the past on such a night of peace, might well hear the small voice of conscience distinctly, but with Sir John there was only superstition and fear.

Motionless shadows on the terrace, and yet Sir John turned suddenly, as though he were conscious of movement, and his eyes rested upon a shadow in the angle of a wall. He had not noticed it before; now for a little space it seemed like other shadows, but Sir John was not deceived. It moved, coming out from the wall and towards him, and a man stood there.

"Martin!"

Sir John was not a coward, but a sigh of relief escaped him when he realised that this was no phantom, but a thing of flesh and blood--only Mad Martin.

"I have waited for you, Sir John."

"The doors were not locked against you, though they well might have been. Where do you spring from to-night, and what have you been doing?"

"Wandering and dreaming."

"In a mad mood, eh?"

"Yes, when I see things and hear voices," said Martin in a sing-song tone, as though he were dreaming now and unconscious of the words his lips uttered. "I heard my mistress calling me. Where is she, Sir John?"

"In London, Martin."

"No; she was, but not now. She was calling from a dark room, and the door was locked. I could see the room, a miserable room, but I could not see her, only hear her. She was in the power of Lord Rosmore."

Sir John bent forward to see Fairley's face more clearly in the moonlight. He had known him in this mood before, known him to give strange but good advice while in this state. He was satisfied that Martin was unconscious now, and was eager to question him.

"What will happen, Martin?"

"I cannot see."

"But why come to the Abbey?"

"She sent me to you. I know not why, but I have waited. I heard her say that I must not be seen. She thought you could save her."

"How?"

Martin put his arm across his eyes for a moment.

"It is all a mist, and the voices are muffled," he said. "You would know what Lord Rosmore would do, and would tell me."

"It will be good for her to marry Lord Rosmore," said Sir John.

"Not good for her, but good for you," was the answer; "she said that. She said you were afraid of him, that you must do as he willed. It was very clear in my dreams."

"Why should I fear him?"

"So many questions give me pain. I was dreaming; I cannot remember everything. One thing is clear. She called to me that you might be free from Lord Rosmore if you knew a secret which the Abbey holds."

"Do you know it, Martin?"

"Yes; she told me, and it is a secret."

"What is it, Martin?"

"A secret, but I was to tell you if you helped her."

"Stop this foolery!" said Sir John, seizing his arm sharply. "You shall be locked up until this wayward niece of mine is safely married."

"Married! Would you die, master?"

"Die?"

"Surely. The stars showed it me long ago. Two planets in conjunction, that was the marriage, and then across the night sky the flash of a meteor, dead and cold in a moment."

"Curse your dreams and the stars!"

"Listen!" said Fairley. "Cannot you hear the music of chinking money? Look, master! I see gems like eyes--white and red and blue--diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. That is all part of the secret, that and the Nun's Room."

"Tell me the secret," said Sir John.

"If you help my mistress."

"I know nothing."

"I have forgotten the secret," Martin whispered.

He moved away slowly and then stopped.

"Master, why not be rich? What is it to you and me what happens to Mistress Barbara, so we can be rich? I would be rich, too. If Lord Rosmore has power over you, money and jewels will buy freedom. It is true, somewhere in the Abbey the wealth of the Indies has been buried. I know it."

"Then tell me, Martin."

"You fool, you fool, you have made me forget, but I shall remember if you will only let me. In dreams, when we promise and do not fulfil, we forget everything. You must help my mistress, or I cannot remember. See, I have a proof. Once, long ago, I found that in the Nun's Room; I thought it was glass, but Mistress Barbara's voice says it is a diamond. Take it, master, you will know."

It was a diamond which Sir John held between his finger and thumb. In the moonlight the colours sparkled, such deep, clear colours as never came from glass. It was a stone that had been set; how had it come into the Nun's Room? Sir John's pulses quickened. If he told what he knew, what harm would be done?

"It is a diamond, Martin."

"One among hidden hundreds. Help the mistress, master, and let us be rich. You must give me a little of all we find, so that I may always have a fire in winter and can eat and drink when I like; that is to be rich, indeed."

"I will tell you what I know, Martin, but how can it help Barbara?"

"She has command of my thoughts, as you speak she will hear; but a warning, master--you must speak the truth. I shall not know the truth from a lie, but she will, and if you lie we shall not find the treasure."

"Barbara went to Dorchester to try and save the highwayman, Gilbert Crosby," said Sir John. "It was Rosmore's device to send her word that Crosby was a prisoner, and on the way she was captured, not by the King's troops as a rebel, but by men in Rosmore's pay. She is in no real danger, but she does not know this. She will not be brought before Jeffreys or any other judge, but she will be treated as though this were to be her fate. Rosmore will save her, do you understand, and in her gratitude she will give him his reward."

"How will he save me?" came the question in a monotonous voice, and Sir John started, for it did not seem as if Martin had asked it.

"The day of the trial will be fixed--it may be to-day or to-morrow, I cannot tell; but the night before she will be smuggled into a waiting coach and driven here to Aylingford."

"Must she promise to marry Lord Rosmore first?"

"Probably. Yes, he will certainly make her promise that before he helps her. It is not a hard promise to make, Martin; Lord Rosmore is a better mate than 'Galloping Hermit.'"

Martin sighed and rubbed his eyes. He looked round him and then at Sir

John.

"I thought I was speaking to Mistress Barbara," he said. "Ah, I remember, I was. We have helped her, Sir John. How she will use that help does not matter. Is she to give a promise to Rosmore? I wonder what will happen if she will not give it?"

"I do not know. Such is Lord Rosmore's plan, but circumstances might make him alter it."

"And if he fails he may denounce her and leave her to her fate," said Martin. "She won't be the only woman to suffer, and, whichever way it ends, we have something else to think of--riches."

"Is it true about this treasure, Martin?" said Sir John.

"True! As true as that Lady Lisle was foully executed at Winchester for just such a crime as Mistress Barbara may be accused of if she will make no promise to Lord Rosmore."

"That is a horrible thought," said Sir John, shrinking from him.

"We mustn't think. Those who would get rich quickly must act. Come."

He led the way along the terrace towards the ruins, and Sir John followed him almost as if he expected to see movement in the motionless shadows about him. The prospect of finding this hidden wealth, and all it would mean to him, shut out every other thought. The legend of buried treasure at the Abbey was not a new one. The monks who had lived in it had grown wealthy--why should they not have left their wealth behind them? Martin was mad, but in his madness he had strange visions; Sir John was satisfied that he had had many proofs of this, and he followed him now, never doubting that the treasure existed and would be found.

They came to the opening of the Nun's Room.

"The creepers in this corner are a natural ladder, Sir John."

"But we cannot go down into it, Martin."

"How else shall we get the riches?"

"Those who enter the Nun's Room die within the year," said Sir John, trembling.

"A tale made to keep the curious from looking for the treasure," Martin answered. "I have gone down many times, but I searched in vain, not having the key to the secret. To-night I have it. I will go first," and, kneeling down, he grasped the creepers, which grew strongly here, and lowered himself quickly.

Sir John was not so agile, but he went down after him. He would have accomplished a far more difficult feat rather than remain behind.

"I wonder whether Mistress Barbara will make that promise?" said Martin, as Sir John came to the floor beside him.

"I wonder."

"If she doesn't, death. If she does, Rosmore will have a wife; the poor highwayman will doubtless hang at Tyburn; but we shall be rich. That matters, nothing else does."

"Nothing else, Martin," and, indeed, Sir John was too excited to be troubled by any other thought.

Martin guided him across the room.

"Feel, Sir John. This is the ledge where they say the Nun slept; creepers hang over it, and behind these creepers--listen, Sir John, listen!" and he knocked sharply against the stone wall. "Hollow! It's true! This is no solid wall as it seems. Feel, Sir John, your finger on the edge of this great slab. A doorway built up, and not so long ago. Listen! Hollow! It's true, it's true!" and Martin jumped and clapped his hands like a child.

"Yes, it's hollow, sure enough," said Sir John.

"Light and a pick. We'll be in the treasure chamber before morning. Wait, Sir John, I'll get them."

"Stop, Martin; where are you going?"

"For a light and a pick," and he climbed out by the creepers in the corner. "I know the treasure has been hidden there. I have seen it in my dreams."

"Be quick, Martin."

"I shall make more haste than I have ever done in my life before," he answered, bending over the edge by the corner. "Poor Rosmore! poor highwayman! Only a wife and a gibbet for them. But for us--"

"Stop talking, Martin, and let us get to work," came the answer from below.

"I wonder whether Mistress Barbara will make a promise?" And Martin cut and wrenched at the creepers where they clung to the stone floor and fallen masonry at the top.

"What are you doing?" said Sir John.

"Freeing myself from the creepers. That's done. I'll hasten, Sir John, never fear."

Something moved in the dark, sunken room, scraping and sliding.

"Martin!"

Sir John could hear the sound of his footsteps quickly lessening in the distance, but there was no answer to his call.

"Martin!"

Still no answer, and the sound of the footsteps had gone. Sir John, with his hands stretched out before him, crossed to the corner where he had come down. His hands came in contact with a tangle of creepers, hanging loose, from the wall. The ladder was broken!

Martin Fairley went swiftly to the terrace and on to one of the stone bridges over the stream. Then he paused and listened.

"He will have to cry loudly to be heard to-night. Grant that he may find no escape until morning."

Then he crossed the bridge and went swiftly through the woods.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FLIGHT

Dorchester was in mourning. If there had been any hope that Mercy and Justice would go hand in hand, if there were a lingering belief that Judge Jeffreys might not be so cruel as it was said, such hopes and beliefs were quickly dispelled the moment that court with its scarlet hangings was opened. Even Judge Marriott shrank a little as his learned brother bullied and laughed and swore at the prisoners, bidding them plead guilty as their only hope of escape, and then condemning them to the gibbet with the ferocity of a drunken fiend. Pity crept into the hard faces of rough soldiers; the devilishness of this judge appalled even them.

Since she had no maid to attend to her, Watson took Barbara her food; but, although he had received no instructions to discontinue his efforts to break her courage by detailing the horrors of the punishment which was being administered to rebels, he spoke of them no more. He pitied this fair woman, and was deeply impressed with her bravery. He was not wholly in his master's confidence, and believed that his prisoner was in grave danger. He did not doubt that under certain conditions she might be saved, but she was not the woman from whom promises could be forced, and no one could know better than Watson did how ruthless his master was in clearing obstacles out of his path, how cruel he was when he became revengeful. He knew that Gilbert Crosby had been allowed an interview with Barbara Lanison, but was ignorant of the purpose. He did not know that her escape had been arranged for, nor that he was to have a part in it; and there were times when he weighed against each other his pity for the woman and his fear of Lord Rosmore, finding it so difficult to tell which outbalanced the other that he went a step further and thought out plans for getting Mistress Lanison away from Dorchester. Not one of his schemes could possibly have succeeded, but the trooper found a satisfaction in making them.

Barbara was speedily aware of the change in Watson's manner towards her, but she was not astonished. It was natural under the changed conditions of her imprisonment. Every hour brought her freedom nearer, and the man knew this, she supposed, and treated her accordingly. Concerning her escape she did not question him, but she did ask him whether Judge Jeffreys had arrived, and if the Assizes had begun.

"Truth, madam, my duty keeps me in this house, and I know little of what is happening in the town."

"Nor how the prisoners will be treated?" Barbara asked.

"Some say this and some say that," Watson replied evasively, "and I have enough to do without thinking about the lawyer's work. When I hear lawyers talk I can't tell right from wrong. You have to be trained to understand the jargon."

So Barbara Lanison heard nothing of the mourning that was in the town, and had naught to do during the long waiting hours but think of the future and all that it meant to her. She was going with Gilbert Crosby, but he had promised that, once they were in safety, she should choose her own way. Would she take his road? She loved him. The fact was so absorbing that nothing else seemed to matter; yet she had many lonely hours for thought, and it would have been strange indeed if none of the circumstances of her life, of her position, had demanded her consideration. To trust this lover with her future meant the snapping of every tie which bound her to the past; it must mean, in the world's eyes, bringing contempt upon her name. She faced the truth bravely. It seemed an impossible thing that Barbara Lanison of Aylingford should marry Galloping Hermit the highwayman. Such a thing might appeal as a romantic tale, but in the real world it meant disgrace. In another land love might be hers, such love, perchance, as few women have ever had, but could it obliterate the past? Would she ever be able to forget that the man beside her, his face hidden behind the brown mask, had waited, pistol in hand, upon the high road, to rob passing travellers? All men were not cowards, nor did they travel unprepared for danger; there must have been times when the pistols had spoken in the silence of the night, when some hapless traveller had died upon the roadside. Surely there was blood upon the hands of the man she loved! The thought bowed her head, and her hands clasped as if a spasm of sudden pain had seized her. No repentance in the long years to come, not all the good that might be done in them, could wipe out the past. And then she tried to find excuses for that past, some reason that could justify the life he had chosen. Some very definite reason there must have been. The artificial glamour of the life would not attract such a man as Gilbert Crosby. He must have imagined that justice was on his side, that there was some wrong to right, to make him defy all the laws of life and property and become a menace and a terror to his fellows.

Stories concerning Galloping Hermit had already passed into legend. His greatest exploits always seemed to be against those who were cruel in their dealings with others, who were unjust, or those whose lives were notoriously bad; and there were many tales of courtesy, of consideration, of help, which were totally out of keeping with the ordinary career of a highwayman. Barbara remembered his treatment of Judge Marriott, remembered what he had said. He was, the world said it, quite apart from all other highwaymen; nevertheless, there was a price upon his head, and the shadow of Tyburn lay dark across his path. And yet he was Gilbert Crosby, the man she loved, the man who was blessed and nightly prayed for in many a humble home in this West Country. What did the world hold for her that she should thrust such a man out of her life? Which way was she to choose--that which led Lack in her uncle's world, with its Rosmores, its Branksomes, its Marriotts, its Mistress Dearmers, and its shams of love which was vice, and of life which was moral death; or that which led to quiet obscurity with the man she loved, a sinner, but repentant, in whose worship she could trust, and whose touch thrilled her very soul? Had she not almost promised already--to take her way with him?

The second day of her waiting had ended, darkness had come; to-morrow

night she would go. At about this hour galloping horses would be hurrying her away from Dorchester. Her thoughts were full of to-morrow, when the key turned quietly in the lock and Watson entered.

"Good news, madam. I only heard it an hour ago, and was never more pleased in my life."

"What news?"

"That you are to leave Dorchester, and with Mr. Crosby. Craving your pardon, madam, I know something of your reason for coming to the West; and, for all I'm so rough a fellow, I'm fond o' lovers."

"Thank you," said Barbara, for the man was evidently pleased.

"And it comes sooner than you expected," said Watson. "The road is safe, and you are to go to-night."

"To-night!"

"Yes, now. Mr. Crosby will already be waiting on the road which leads down to the river. I am to see you safely there."

"But to-night? Are you sure there is no mistake?"

"Quite sure. We must go at once."

Barbara went quickly into the inner room, and in a few moments returned closely wrapped in an ample cloak.

"Draw the hood down over your head," said Watson. "The less left for prying eyes to see the better. You have the papers signed by Judge Marriott?"

"Yes."

"One word, madam. No one will hinder us in this house. At the door into the street turn to the right. I shall walk close behind you. Do not hurry. Do not stop if anyone should speak to you, and do not answer them. Walk forward as if I had nothing to do with you."

"I understand."

"Pardon, but the hood does not quite hide your hair. Such hair might betray you if we should meet enemies to-night, for I never saw its like."

Barbara readjusted the hood, and wondered if Gilbert Crosby admired her hair as this trooper did.

Watson opened the door, and they went down the passage together. Two men on the top of the stairs stood aside to let them pass; the street door was open, and Barbara turned to the right, walking alone, the soldier close behind her.

It was a narrow street, and dark, only a light gleaming out here and there from an unshuttered window; but there were many people abroad, whispering together, and Barbara heard sobbing, once coming through an open window, once from a woman who passed her quickly.

"Twenty-nine," she heard one man say in hoarse tones, "the first fruits of this bloody vengeance."

"Curse him! May hell reward him," said his companion.

Barbara shuddered as she passed on, although she did not realise what the words meant.

Then a man stood in her path for a moment.

"A fine night, mistress," he cried. "Twenty-nine of them by the roadside, the chains creaking and the moonlight touching the white faces. Never such a thing in Dorchester before. A damned judge, but what a show!" And then, with a laugh, he ran past her. The voice and the laughter were those of a maniac.

Barbara knew now. Judge Jeffreys had commenced his work. Must she pass those hideous signs of it?

"Turn to the right," said Watson behind her.

She turned, as she was told, into a quieter street, and hurried a little. To be free from this horrible place, it was her only thought. Before she had gone far the houses began to straggle; she was at the edge of the town. The moon was just rising, and by its misty light Barbara saw that the open country was before her. A little further on, the road began to dip, and there, in the shadow of a belt of trees, stood a carriage. There were no gibbets with their twenty-nine victims along this road; that sight she was spared.

Watson came to a standstill.

"Mr. Crosby waits, madam. Good fortune go with you."

"Thank you," she said, and pressed some coins into the man's hand. "Some day, perhaps, I may thank you better."

The soldier saluted as she went forward, watching her, but not following her.

The post-boy was already in his place, and it was evident that the horses were impatient to be gone. A groom stood beside the carriage.

"Mr. Crosby is here, madam," the man said as he opened the door. "There is no time to lose."

Barbara entered the coach quickly, and literally fell into the arms of the man who was awaiting her, for as the door was shut the horses bounded forward.

"Gilbert!"

The hood had fallen from her fair hair as she turned and leaned towards him, and at this moment there was no doubt in her mind which way she would choose. Then with a cry she shrank back into the corner of the coach. It was not Gilbert Crosby beside her, but Lord Rosmore!

CHAPTER XXVII

OUT OF DORCHESTER

Watson went back into Dorchester humming the chorus of a tavern song. It mattered not to him that twenty-nine rebels swung on their gibbets, but it was an intense relief to him that Mistress Barbara Lanison was safely out of the town. He doubted whether he could have seen her condemned in silence, and to speak might have meant that he would speedily swing by the roadside, so he was glad for himself as well as for her. Watson was totally unconscious that he had helped to deliver his prisoner into the hands of Lord Rosmore. He had received definite instructions to see that she safely reached the coach in which Gilbert Crosby was awaiting her; he was not to attend her to the door of the coach lest the post-boy and groom should become suspicious, but to wait and see that she drove away in safety. These instructions he had fulfilled to the letter, and glad to have been concerned in such a happy escape, he went back singing.

From first to last Lord Rosmore had carefully matured his scheme. He had entrusted Watson with one part of it, Sayers with another, and drew a veil over the whole by openly showing and avowing his love for Harriet Payne. He might have enemies in the town, but what power had they? Fear closed Judge Marriott's mouth; the fiddler, Martin Fairley, had vanished into some hole to hide himself; Crosby was waiting patiently for the fulfilment of his promise; and Sydney Fellowes, who, to his surprise, he learnt was also in Dorchester, could do little against him. Still, it is ever the little weaknesses which are the danger-points in great enterprises, and Rosmore realised that Fellowes' presence in Dorchester might bring all his plans to the ground. Great was his satisfaction, therefore, when Barbara entered the coach and the horses started on their journey.

At that moment Fellowes was listening to Martin Fairley's account of his visit to Aylingford. Martin had entered the town half an hour before, and had gone straight to Fellowes' lodging. During his absence the meeting-place at "The Anchor" in West Street might have been discovered, and Martin could not afford to run any risk to-night. To both men it seemed evident that Crosby's reliance in Rosmore's promise was futile. It was possible, even probable, that Sir John Lanison might not know all Rosmore's plans, or might not have told everything he knew, but all faith in Rosmore must fall like a building of cards.

"That road to the river must be watched, Fellowes," said Martin.

"I'll go at once."

"And I will get to 'The Anchor' and see Crosby."

They were leaving the house when a woman met them, inquiring for Mr. Gilbert Crosby.

"What do you want with him?" Martin asked.

"Ah, you are the fiddler, but you are a coward." And Harriet Payne's cloak fell apart as she turned to Fellowes. "Are you Mr. Crosby's friend?"

Martin gave him a quick sign.

"Yes. Is he in danger? Come in and tell me."

"Did you know that he was to have escaped from Dorchester with Mistress Lanison to-morrow night?" said Harriet as Fellowes closed the door.

"Yes."

"He's fooled--fooled from first to last. She has gone to-night. She left Dorchester, not an hour ago, with Lord Rosmore. He has lied to her and to me," and the girl's eyes blazed with fury as she spoke.

"Gone! Willingly, do you mean?"

"Willingly!" exclaimed the girl. "She hates him; she was wiser than I was. I loved him. She is in his power to-night."

"Which road did they take?" asked Fellowes.

"That which goes towards the river, afterwards I do not know. If you are men follow him. Avenge Mistress Lanison and me."

"You have lied before this," said Martin quietly. "With a lie you brought Mistress Lanison to the West. You played Lord Rosmore's game for him. How do we know that you are speaking the truth now?"

"I hate him! Love turned to hate--do you know what that means?" said the girl, turning upon him like some wild animal. "To-night I waited for him and he did not come. Servants saw me and laughed; then one man, jeering at me, told me the truth. He has gone with her, and every moment you waste he is speeding from you. More, to make himself doubly secure, men will come here at midnight asking for Mr. Crosby. They will pretend to come from Mistress Lanison, and then capture him. A hasty trial, and then the gibbet."

"We'll follow," said Martin.

"And kill him--kill him!" said the girl. "And if you have any thought for a deceived woman, let him know that I sent you."

A few moments later Martin and Fellowes were in the street, talking eagerly as they went. Martin's head was not barren of schemes to-night.

"You understand, Fellowes. To Crosby first. Tell him everything. Bid him not spare his horse, nor pass a coach without knowing who rides in it. Then let him hasten to 'The Jolly Farmers,' Tell him to wait there for me as he did once before. On no account must he leave it. Then start on your road, and leave Dorchester behind you as fast as horse can gallop. One of us shall find Rosmore before the dawn."

* * * * *

Heavy clouds sailed majestically across the face of the moon. Now the long road lay dimly discernible in the pale misty light, now for a time it was dark, so that a coach might have driven unawares on to the greensward, or a stranger stumbled into the ditch by the roadside. Lonely trees shivered at intervals with a sound like sudden rain, and

from the depths of distant woods came notes of low wailing, as though sad ghosts mourned in a hushed chorus. Hamlets were asleep, and not a light shone from wayside dwellings. Yet into a tired man's dreams there came the rhythmic beat of a horse's hoofs, far distant, then nearer, nearer, and dying again into silence. A late rider, and with this half-conscious thought, and an uneasy turning on the pillow perhaps, sleep again. On another road, beating hoofs suddenly came to the ears of a wakeful woman; someone escaping in the night, perhaps, and she murmured a prayer; she had a son who had fought at Sedgemoor. The grinding of coach wheels on one road, followed by the barking of dogs; and a woodcutter asleep in his hut, which lay at the edge of a forest track, was startled by the thud of hoofs, and, springing quickly from his hard couch, peeped from the door. Nothing to be seen, but certainly the sound of a horse going quickly away. There was naught in his hut to bring him a visit from a highwayman.

A man, riding in haste towards Dorchester, with papers and money in his pocket which might save his son from Judge Jeffreys, halted suddenly. Meeting him came another galloping horseman, and suddenly the moonlight showed him.

"Have you passed a coach upon the road?"

The galloping horseman drew rein, and the anxious father trembled. Horse and rider might have been of one piece; every movement of man and animal was perfect, and the man wore the dreaded brown mask.

"No, I have not seen a coach." And the father, remembering vaguely that this notorious highwayman was said to have helped many to escape from the West, burst out in pleading. "Oh, sir, have mercy. My son lies a prisoner in Dorchester, and the money I have may be his salvation."

"Pass on, friend. Good luck go with you." And with a clatter of hoofs the brown mask rode on.

Gallop Hermit was on the road to-night, but a score of travellers, carrying all the wealth they possessed, might have passed him in safety. He was out to stop one coach wherein sat a villain, and a fair woman whom he loved. Surely she must be shrinking back in her corner, so that even the hem of her gown might not be soiled by the touch of the man beside her.

Lord Rosmore had not attempted to justify himself as the coach started upon its journey; he had only told her that escape was impossible, that the post-boy was in his pay and had his instructions. Barbara had called him a villain through her closed teeth, and then had shrunk into her corner, drawing the hood of the cloak closely over her head. She realised that for the moment she was helpless, that her captor was on his guard, but an opportunity might come presently. The more she appeared to accept the situation, the less watch was he likely to keep on her. It was a natural argument, perhaps, but far removed from fact. Never for an instant did Lord Rosmore cease to watch her. This time he meant to bend her to his will, if not one way, then another; fair means had failed, therefore he would use foul. For a long while he was silent, and then he began to explain why he had acted as he had done. Again he showed her how impossible a lover was Gilbert Crosby, and he painted the many crimes of a highwayman in lurid colours. He knew she must have thought of these things, and he declared that the day would come when she would thank him for what he had done to-night.

Barbara did not answer him, and there was a long silence as the coach rolled steadily on.

Then Lord Rosmore ventured to excuse himself. He spoke passionately of his love for her. His way with women was notorious; seldom had he loved in vain, and women whose ears had refused to listen to all other lovers had fallen before his temptations; yet never had woman heard such burning words as he spoke in the darkness of the coach to Barbara Lanison. He was commanding and humble by turns, his voice was tremulous with passion, yet not a word did Barbara speak in answer.

Rosmore lapsed into silence again, and he trembled a little with the passion that was in him. Love her he certainly did in his own way, and he bit his lip and clenched his hands, furious at his failure. It took him some time to control himself.

"There are many reasons why you should marry me," he said presently. "Some of them I have given, but there are others why you must marry me."

He gave her time to answer, but she neither spoke nor moved. Her indifference maddened him.

"Your uncle is wholly in my power, you must have guessed that. A word from me, and this fellow Crosby hangs. Sir John is afraid, and you cannot suppose that I have left Crosby in Dorchester to go or come as he likes. He cannot move without my help. I wonder if you realise what your persistent refusal of me will mean. You may drive me to harsh measures, and make a devil of me. Thwart me, and I stand at nothing. I will bring your uncle to the hangman, and Crosby shall rot in chains at four cross-roads."

Barbara moved slightly, but she tightly shut her lips that she might not be tempted to speak. He thought her movement was one of contempt, and turned upon her savagely.

"And there is yet another way," he hissed, bending towards her. "I swear to God I will use it rather than let you go. A careless word or two shall easily suffice to smirch your fair fame. Ah! that has power to rouse you, has it? I will do it, and for very shame you shall have to listen to me."

Still she did not answer him. Silence had served her well. He had shown himself to her in all the blackness of his soul. He might kill her, but there were worse things than death. She would remain silent. And the coach rolled on, now in darkness, now in the misty light of the moon.

There was a dip in the road that every coach-driver knew, a sudden stiff descent into a thick wood, the trees arching and mingling their branches, almost like a lofty green tunnel, and then a sharp ascent. Drivers usually let their horses go, so that the impetus of the descent would help to carry them up the opposite incline, for the road was loose, and, with a full load of passengers, the climb tested the strength of the best teams. Lonely Bottom it was called, and well named, for there was no more deserted spot along the road.

The highwayman checked his horse to a walking pace when he came to this dip, and went slowly down, and slowly climbed the opposite ascent. He patted the mare's neck, and spoke to her in whispers.

"Well done, my beauty! Unless all the fates are against us we have got in front of the coach. The glory is yours. I know no other that could have carried me as you have done to-night. We shall win, lass, and then you shall take life easier."

The mare seemed to understand as she climbed out of the hollow and appeared ready to gallop on again; but her rider drew her on the greensward beside the road, just beyond the wood, and dismounted. He had no doubt that the coach was behind him. He had come by short cuts across country, along bridle-paths which shortened the journey. He had not struck the road long before he met the traveller going towards Dorchester who said that no coach had passed him. He leaned against the trunk of a tree, which years ago had been struck and killed by lightning, and his thoughts were busy as he looked to the priming of his pistols and made sure that certain papers he carried were secure in a leathern case, which he slipped back into the pocket of his ample, caped coat. His plans were mature. His presence there would be a complete surprise. He could not fail so long as the coach came, and it would come. Yet, in spite of this conviction, he began to grow anxious and restless as the time passed slowly and no sound broke the stillness of the night. It was not the first time he had waited by the roadside listening for his victim. Excitement he had experienced before to-night, but never such anxiety, nor such restlessness. To-night's adventure was a thing apart. A woman's happiness depended on his success, a woman with a crown of golden hair like an aureole about her, who must even now be shrinking from the villain in whose company she travelled.

Presently he started. Most men would have discovered no new sound upon the night air, but his ears were experienced and keen. For a moment he stood beside the mare, his hand upon her neck, then he sprang lightly to the saddle.

"The time has come, my hearty. Here is our place, in the shadow."

Out of the silence grew the sound of distant wheels grinding the road, and the beating of horses' hoofs. A coach travelling rapidly. Each moment the sounds became more distinct, and then loud as the horses plunged down the incline into Lonely Bottom. At a gallop they breasted the climb out, but the clatter of hoofs quickly grew uneven as the weight told. The post-boy was using the whip vigorously as they drew to the top, and then the coach suddenly came to a standstill. The window rattled down, and a head was thrust out.

"Move, and you're a dead man!"

The coach had drawn out of the shadows into the moonlight, and Lord Rosmore started back, so close was the pistol to his head. He looked along it, and along the man's extended arm, and into his face, and a half-smothered cry broke from his lips. He had been caught unawares. Physically he was no coward, but the sight of the brown mask seemed to paralyse him.

"You!"

"Open the door and get out. Quickly, or, by heaven, you shall fall out with a bullet through your brain."

From this man Lord Rosmore knew he could expect no mercy, knew that he

was likely to be as good as his word, and he got out.

"Down with you," said the highwayman to the post-boy. "Take this rope, and see that you fasten this gentleman securely to that tree yonder. One loose knot that may give him a chance of escape, and I'll see to it that you never throw your leg across the back of a horse again."

Covering them with his pistol, he watched this operation performed.

"See that he has no firearms," and the lad hastened to do as he was told.

The highwayman carefully examined the cord, and made sure that the captive could not get free without help. Then he went to the door of the coach.

"You are safe, Mistress Lanison."

"Gilbert!" she whispered.

"Pitch anything that belongs to this fellow into the road."

A coat was thrown out.

"Curse you both!" said Rosmore. "By God! if I live you shall pay for your work to-night!"

"Is he to pay the price, mistress?" said the highwayman. "You know what you have suffered at his hands. What things have his vile lips threatened you with to-night? His life is in your hands. Speak, and the world shall be well rid of him."

"Oh, no, Gilbert, no!"

"I almost wish you had said 'Yes.' Mount!" he called to the post-boy.

A string of oaths came from Lord Rosmore.

"Silence!" the highwayman shouted, but the oaths did not cease. Then a sharp report rang out upon the night, and a cry came from the captive.

"Oh, Gilbert, you have killed him!"

"That was a cry of fear, mistress. The bullet is in the tree a good four feet above his head," said the highwayman as he closed the coach door.

"You must travel for the rest of the journey alone, but have no fear. I ride by the coach to see you into safety. Forward, post-boy! Good-night, Lord Rosmore. A woman betrayed you, even as you have betrayed many women. Thank fate that your life lay in the hands of Mistress Lanison, and not in hers. She would have bid me shoot straight. Good-night."

For a moment the highwayman let his horse paw the ground in front of the man bound helplessly to the tree. Then he laughed, as a man will who plays a winning game, and rode after the coach.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LEATHER CASE

Her rescue had been so sudden, so unexpected, that it was difficult for Barbara to realise that she was alone in the coach, that she need no longer shrink away from a man she hated, that her ears were no more assailed by threats and vile insinuations. The relief was so intense that for a little while she revelled in her liberty, and cried a little for very joy. Why did not the man who had delivered her come to the door of the coach and talk to her? Not as he had done just now, calling her Mistress Lanison and seeming not to hear when she had called him Gilbert, but as he had spoken to her that other night in her prison in Dorchester. She leaned forward to listen. Yes, he was on the road behind her, she could hear the steady canter of his horse; why did he not ride where she could see him? He must know that she would want him close beside her. Did he know it? He wore the brown mask to-night, and, oh, the difference it made! With that silken disguise, and with his coat close fastened at the throat, she would never have recognised him in the moonlight had she not known who he was. Involuntarily she shuddered a little at the thought that he was indeed two men, so distinct that even she, had she not known, would have failed to see her lover in the wearer of the brown mask. Why did he not come to the window, come as himself, without that hideous disguise which distressed her and brought so many horrible fancies and fears into her mind? Should she call to him? She was much tempted to do so, but surely he knew what was best for her to-night. There might be other enemies upon the road, she was safer perhaps in the charge of the brown mask than she would have been had he ridden beside her as Gilbert Crosby.

The coach rolled steadily on through the night, now in the shadow of dark woods, now across a stretch of common land where the misty moonlight seemed to turn the landscape into a dream world, silent and empty save for the sound of the grinding wheels and the steady beating of the horses' hoofs. The long monotony of the sound became a lullaby to the girl, tired in body and mind. Last night, and the night before, she had slept little; now, with a sense of security, she closed her eyes, only that she might think the more clearly. There were many things she must think of. Gilbert Crosby would not easily let her go, this she knew, and to-morrow, perhaps, she would have to answer his question, would have to decide which way she would take. The lullaby of the grinding wheels became softer, more musical; the corner of the coach seemed to grow more comfortable; once she started slightly, for she seemed to have stepped suddenly back into her prison in Dorchester, then she smiled, knowing that she was free, that Lord Rosmore was bound and helpless, that Gilbert Crosby was near her. The smile remained upon her lips, but she did not move again. She was asleep. Even the jolting upon the rougher by-road along which the coach was driven presently did not rouse her. She did not see the dawn creeping out of the east, she was not conscious that the highwayman came to the window and looked at her, that he stopped the coach for a moment, nor did she feel the touch of gentle hands as he folded her cloak more closely about her lest the chill breath of the morning air should hurt her.

The dawn came slowly, very slowly, to the man bound securely to the tree by the roadside. When the sound of the wheels had died away, Lord Rosmore struggled to free himself, but the post-boy had done his work too well. Every knot was securely fastened and out of reach. Once or twice he

shouted for help, and the only answer was an echo from the woods. Unless a chance traveller came along the road he could not get released until the day broke. It was wasting strength to shout, and he wanted all his strength to help him through the strain of the night. All his will was bent on not allowing his cramped position to so weaken him that to-morrow he would be unable to pursue his enemy. Crosby had outwitted him for the moment, but to-morrow the game might be in his hands again, and he must retain his strength to play it. Many a man would have lost consciousness during the night, but Lord Rosmore's determined spirit and fierce lust for revenge helped him. He would not allow his limbs to grow stiff, the cords gave a little, and every few minutes he twisted himself into a slightly different position. He would not close his weary eyes, but set his brain to work out a scheme for Crosby's downfall. The coach would certainly make for the coast presently. Some delay there must be before reaching it, and further delay before a vessel could be found to carry the fugitives into safety. Crosby could not possibly be prepared for what had happened, and time must be wasted in making up his mind how to use to the best advantage the trick in the game which had fallen to him. Galloping Hermit, the highwayman, must be cautious how he went, and caution meant delay at every turn. He would not easily escape.

So the dawn found Lord Rosmore with aching limbs but with a clear brain, and he looked about him, as far as he was able, wondering from which direction help would most likely come. On the ground, at a little distance from him, lay a heavy coat, just as Barbara had thrown it from the coach last night, and a growling oath came from Rosmore's dry lips. He wished with all his heart that he had delivered her into Judge Jeffreys' hands in Dorchester. She would have been just such a delicate morsel as the loathsome brute would have gloated over. How easily, too, he might have had Crosby hanged in chains. He had been a fool to let love influence him. Then his eyes turned slowly to the ground immediately in front of him. The turf was cut and trampled where the highwayman had been, by the impatient hoofs of his pawing horse, and there lay in the very centre of the trampled patch a leather case. It must have fallen from Crosby's pocket last night. Had the highwayman unwittingly left behind him a clue that would be his ruin?

The thought excited the helpless man, and he began to listen for coming succour, and once or twice he shouted, but it was only a feeble sound, for his throat was parched, and his tongue had swollen in his mouth.

Chance came to his aid at last; a dog bounding from the woods not far distant saw him, and racing to the tree tore round and round it, barking furiously, bringing a man out into the open to see what so excited the animal. The woodman hastened forward.

"Eh, master, but what's been adoin'?"

"Highwayman--last night," said Rosmore feebly. Now that help was at hand his strength seemed to dwindle to nothing.

The man cut the cords so vigorously that Rosmore stumbled forwards and fell. For an instant he was powerless to move, and then with an effort he crawled a few inches until his hand touched the leather case.

"The coat," he muttered. "The pocket--a flask."

The liquid revived him, and he drew himself painfully into a sitting posture.

"Galloping Hermit"--the brown mask--last night," he said.

"The brown mask!" exclaimed the man in a low tone, looking round as if he expected to see the famous highwayman. "Your horse gone too."

"It was a coach. I want a horse. Where can I get one?"

"Lor', master, you couldn't get into the saddle."

"Where can I get one?" Rosmore repeated, speaking like a man who was breathless from long running.

"There's the village over yonder, two miles away."

"Lend me your arm. So," and Rosmore drew himself to his feet. "Earn a guinea or two and help me to the village."

"Can you walk at all?" asked the man.

"The stiffness will go by degrees. Slowly to begin with, that's it. Two miles, eh? It will be the longest two miles I've ever walked, but it's early. They won't escape easily. By gad! they shall suffer!"

"Who?"

"Both of them, the man and the woman."

"The woman!"

"Curse you, you nearly let me fall," said Rosmore. "Don't talk. I can't talk."

At a little tavern in the village Lord Rosmore ate and drank, and while he did so he carefully examined the contents of the leather case. There was a key and several papers closely written upon. Rosmore's eyes brightened as he read, and the papers trembled in his hand with excitement. All his thoughts were thrust into one channel, one idea and purpose took possession of him. Soon after noon he painfully mounted a horse which the landlord had procured for him and rode slowly away. He was in no fit condition to take a long journey, so it was fortunate that he had time to spare and could go quietly. He thought no more of Barbara Lanison or Gilbert Crosby, he might follow them to-morrow; but to-day, to-night, he had other work to do, and he laughed softly to himself as he felt the leather case secure in his pocket. Some tricks in the game he had lost, but the winning trick was his.

It was dark when he reached the woods which lay on the opposite bank of the stream below Aylingford. He tethered his horse to a tree and went on foot towards one of the bridges which led to the terrace, and there he waited, leaning against the stone wall, looking at the house. Lights shone from a few of the windows, but the Abbey did not look as if it were full of guests. There was, perhaps, the more need to exercise caution. The balmy air of the night might tempt visitors on to the terrace if the play did not prove exciting, and if the talk became stale and wearisome. So Rosmore waited. He did not intend to enter the house, and a little delay was of no consequence. Only one man besides himself could know the secret which the leather case held, and that other man was far away from Aylingford.

Most of the windows in the Abbey were dark when Rosmore crossed the bridge to the terrace and walked lightly towards the ruins, careful to let the shadows hide him as much as possible. Entering the ruins, he drew the case from his pocket and took out the key. By Martin's tower he stood for a moment to listen, but no sound came to startle him, and he fitted the key into the lock. The door opened easily, and Rosmore entered, closing it again and locking it on the inside. Gently as he did it, the sound echoed weirdly up the winding stairs. The door at the top, and that of Martin's room, hung broken on their hinges. Nothing had been done to them since the night they were forced open in the attempt to capture Gilbert Crosby; nor did it appear that Martin had occupied his room since then. The piece of candle was still upon the shelf, fastened to it with its own grease, and Lord Rosmore lit it. Then he drew the papers from the case, and turned to one portion of the writing. He had already studied it carefully, but he read it once again, and, bending down to the hearth, felt eagerly along the coping which surrounded it. His fingers touched a slight projection, which he pressed inwards and downwards. It moved a little, but some few moments elapsed before he succeeded in making the exact motion necessary, when the front portion of the hearth was depressed and slid back silently.--Taking the piece of candle in his hand, Rosmore stepped into the opening and went cautiously down the narrow twisting stairs, without attempting to shut the secret entrance. The instructions contained in the leather case were exact, even to a rough calculation of the value of the treasure hidden below the Abbey ruins. Rosmore came at last to a wide chamber, bare wall on one side, but on the other three sides were a series of arches, some of them framing recesses merely which were not uniform in depth, some of them forming entrances into other rooms. The corner arch at the further end was the one mentioned in the papers, and Rosmore went slowly across the stone floor, the feeble light of the candle casting weird shadows about him. For the first time the eeriness of the place forced itself upon him. These stone walls must have sheltered many a secret besides the one he had come to solve. Unholy deeds might well have happened here, and into his memory came crowding many a legend he had heard of Aylingford Abbey. Phantoms of the past might yet haunt these dark places, and to the man breaking into this silence alone ghosts were easy to believe in. Phantoms of the present might be there, too, for to-day vice was the ruling spirit of the Abbey, and there were those who declared that evil might take shape and in an appointed hour deal out punishment to its votaries.

Rosmore found an effort necessary to retain his courage as he went towards the opposite corner. The light, held above his head, fell quivering into the recess there, and touched a great oak coffer, massively made, and heavily bound with iron. It was exactly as the papers said, and therein lay the treasure, gold and jewels--the wealth of the Indies, as the writing called it. He stood for a moment looking at the recess, and then, as he took a hasty step forward, he started, and a sharp hiss of indrawn breath came from his lips. A sudden sound had struck upon his ear, a grating noise, then silence, then light footsteps. In a moment Rosmore had blown out the candle, his one idea being to hide himself; fear caught him, the darkness was so great. Who was it? What was it coming towards him with those stealthy steps? Nearer they came, and from one of the arches a faint glimmer of light, as though the old walls were growing luminous, and a man carrying a lantern entered the chamber and stood there, raising the lantern above his head. It was Sir John Lanison. A little sigh of relief escaped from Rosmore. He had only flesh and blood to deal with, a man full of foolish

superstition. He, too, must have come seeking treasure, but which way had he come, and how had he found the courage to embark on such an adventure? Must two participate in this treasure after all! No, however great it might be, Rosmore wanted it all. He would not share it with any man. A word growled in the darkness would terrify the superstitious Sir John; he would flee as though ten thousand devils were at his heels, or perchance the sudden terror might kill him. The alternative did not trouble Lord Rosmore, and he smiled as Sir John came slowly towards him, holding the lantern close to the floor that he might not step into some hole. As the light came close to his motionless figure, Rosmore uttered a low cry, weird enough to startle the bravest man. It may have startled Sir John, but he did not shriek out in fear nor turn to flee. He raised the lantern sharply, and it hardly trembled in his hand.

"Rosmore!" he exclaimed.

Rosmore was so taken back by this strange courage that he did not answer at once, and the two men stood with the raised lantern lighting both their faces.

* * * * *

When Martin Fairley had left him down in the Nun's Room, Sir John had been terrified. He had shouted for help to no purpose, and he was not released until early on the following morning. How he came to be there he did not explain. He went to his own room, and gave instructions that he was not to be disturbed. Once alone, his mind became active, and he shook himself free from his fear. Wealth was within his grasp. That Martin had run away and left him did not shake his belief. Martin was a madman, not responsible for his actions from one moment to another, but in his trance he had seen this treasure, therefore it was there, Sir John argued. More, the entrance to it lay behind the Nun's hard couch; only a stone slab blocked the entrance. Greed took the place of fear, and it may be that Sir John was a little off his mental balance, and forgot to think of fear. He was certainly cunning enough to make plans and to carry them out secretly. He left his room unseen, and the Abbey by a small door seldom used; and, having secured a pick and a length of rope while the stable men were at their dinner, he went to the Nun's Room. He would chance anyone coming into the ruins and hearing him at work, and nobody did come. He fastened the rope round a piece of fallen masonry which was firmly embedded in the ground and lowered himself. He worked all the afternoon, and the stone slab was loose before he climbed out of the Nun's Room again. Then he went back and mixed with his guests for an hour or two, so that they might not grow anxious about him and come to look for him. Escaping from them with an excuse that he could not play to-night, and must retire early, he went again to the ruins and resumed his work by the light of a lantern. He had succeeded in gaining an entrance, the hidden treasure was a fact; his one idea was to get possession of it, and, absorbed in this thought, other sensations were dormant for the time being. He was so savage that anyone else should know the secret that he forgot to be afraid. When the lantern showed him who his rival was, there was no need to be afraid, for Lord Rosmore would assume that they could be partners in this as they had been in much else, and Sir John smiled, for he intended to free himself from such a partnership. He had a pistol with him, and since Rosmore had evidently come to the Abbey secretly, no one would be likely to look for him there.

"There are evidently two ways to the treasure, Sir John?" said Rosmore

after a pause.

"And we have found them," was the answer. "It is lucky that no one else forestalled us. The treasure first. We may count it, and tell each other how we found it afterwards."

Lord Rosmore turned to the recess, and Sir John went eagerly forward with the lantern. The exact position of the treasure he had not known, but catching sight of the iron-bound box, he determined that no one should share its contents with him. He set down the lantern.

"The key in the lock!" he exclaimed. "It was foolish to leave it in the lock."

"Who would come to this infernal tomb?" said Rosmore.

"Two of us have come," said Sir John, as he turned the key and raised the heavy lid.

A few crumpled pieces of paper, one or two torn pieces of cloth, an empty canvas bag, half of a broken jewel case, and in one corner the glitter of two or three links of a gold chain. This was all the great chest contained!

"You forgot that bit of chain when you removed the treasure, Sir John," said Rosmore, pointing to it.

"Liar! Robber! Where is it?"

Rosmore laughed; perhaps he was unconscious that he did so.

The empty chest seemed to have paralysed his brain for a moment. He could not think. He could not devise a scheme for forcing the truth from his rival.

Sir John had only one idea--revenge. This man had robbed him. The treasure was gone, but the thief was before him. With an oath he sprang forward, there was a flash in Rosmore's face, and a report which echoed back from every side sharply. The bullet missed its mark, chipping the stone wall behind. Then the two men were locked together in a silent, deadly struggle. Lord Rosmore was the stronger and the younger man, but he had not recovered from the cramped position in which he had spent the long hours of last night, and perhaps Sir John was mad and had something of a madman's strength. Neither could throw the other off, nor gain the advantage. Fingers found throats, and gripped and pressed inwards with deadly meaning. Never a word was spoken. The lamp was overturned and went out, each man holding to his adversary the tighter lest he should escape in the darkness. Shuffling feet and gasping breaths, then a heavy fall, then silence.

* * * * *

Daylight crept down into the Nun's Room and into Martin's room, with its gaping hearth, but no one came out through the hole behind the Nun's hard bed, nor climbed the narrow stairs into the tower room. The day passed, and the night, and another dawn came. The door of the tower was still locked on the inside, and the rope was still hanging into the sunken room. That morning the rope was seen when the ruins were searched, and presently two of the guests climbed down and entered the

underground chamber, carrying lanterns and walking carefully.

Sir John Lanison and Lord Rosmore were both dead. Both faces were discoloured and told of a horrible struggle. It looked as if Rosmore had succumbed first, for he lay on his back, his arms flung out. Sir John was lying partly across his body; it seemed as though his fingers had just relaxed their hold on Rosmore's throat.

Why this awful tragedy? One of the guests noticed the iron-bound chest, and, looking in, saw the broken gold chain gleaming in the lantern light.

"A treasure!" he exclaimed, holding it up. "All that is left of it!"

Then they looked at the dead men, so suggestive in their ghastly attitude, and they thought they understood. Those old monks, thinking perhaps that they would one day return to their old home, must certainly have buried a treasure under the walls of Aylingford.

CHAPTER XXIX

SAFETY

The door of "The Jolly Farmers" had only just been opened to the business of a new day when Gilbert Crosby came by a narrow track through the woods on to the road. His horse was jaded, and bore evidences of having been hard ridden.

At the inn door Crosby dismounted, and the landlord came hurrying out to welcome his early visitor. He looked at the horse, and then shouted towards the stables.

"It's evident you are going no further on that animal at present. Shall I hide him in the place I have in the woods yonder? Have you given them the slip, or are they close upon your heels?"

"There is no need to hide him," said Crosby, as he entered the inn. "It would seem that you remember me."

"Aye, faces have a way of sticking in my memory. I had to conceal you one night when you came inquiring for a fiddler."

"This morning I am come to look for him again."

"His appointment?" asked the landlord.

"Yes."

"Then you may wait contentedly. I never knew him to fail. If he failed I should say he had met his death on the way. Death is the only thing that would stand between his promise and its fulfilment. Come into the inner room. We might get other early visitors, and the door in the wall might be useful."

"And food--what about food at this early hour? I am well-nigh starving."

"I'll see to that, and I take it that a draught of my best ale will take the dust out o' your throat pleasantly. That beast of yours has done a long spell from stable to stable, I warrant."

"From Dorchester," said Crosby.

"And that's a place you're well out of, since Jeffreys must be there by this time."

Crosby nodded, and the landlord drew the ale and busied himself with ordering his guest's breakfast.

Crosby had but half appeased his hunger when the sound of wheels was upon the road. As he hurried out the landlord stopped him.

"Carefully, sir. Better let me see who it is."

"Quickly, then! It is a coach, and I must know who rides in it."

The tired horses came to a halt before the door, and by the coach was a horseman, the dust of a long journey upon his horse, upon his clothes, even upon the brown mask which concealed his face. Then the window of the coach was lowered, and a head was thrust out, a head shining with golden curls which the hood did not wholly conceal. Only a few minutes ago Barbara had roused from her long sleep, startled for a little space that the walls of her prison at Dorchester were not about her. The knowledge that she was free, that she had escaped from Lord Rosmore, quickly brought the colour to her cheeks, and her eyes were bright and full of questions as she looked at the man in the mask.

"Barbara!"

She turned with a sharp little cry of bewilderment. The landlord, standing at the inn doorway, had been thrust aside, and Gilbert Crosby was beside her. He lifted her from the coach, yet even when he had set her on the ground he did not release her.

"Gilbert, I do not understand--I thought--" and her eyes turned towards the masked horseman.

"I know not who you really are, sir," said Crosby. "I know that you are called 'Gallop Hermit,' I know that I am so deeply your debtor that I can never hope to repay. At Lenfield a little while ago you saved my life, to-day you bring me what is more than life."

"And a message," said the highwayman. "Word from a certain fiddler you expected to find here. He will not come. It has fallen to my lot to rescue this lady from a scoundrel, and I do not think he will attempt to follow you. There are horses to be had from the landlord here, and in half an hour you may be on the road for Southampton. The fiddler bids you not to wait for him, but, on the road, to stop at a house named 'The Spanish Galleon,' There you will find a friend who has secured your safe departure from the country."

"You will not tell me who you are?" said Crosby, whose keen eyes were trying to penetrate the disguise.

"Gallop Hermit, Mr. Crosby."

"While fresh horses are being harnessed, Mistress Lanison will have a hasty breakfast, at least share the meal with us."

"Daylight is dangerous for me. I ride safely only in the night. A tankard of ale, landlord, and then for a hiding hole."

Barbara gently put Crosby's arm away from her, and went to the horseman's side.

"Whoever you may be, I thank you from the bottom of my heart," she said. "You cannot know all that you are to me. You have been constantly in my thoughts; I will not tell you why, but I have shuddered to think what must sometimes have happened when you rode in the night. Might not the brown mask cease to exist? Some day I may be in England again, may be strong to help if need should come. Take this ring of mine. The man who brings it to me, though many years should pass between now and then, shall never ask of me in vain. Burn the mask, sir, and learn that you are too honest a gentleman for such a trade."

The man took the ring.

"Mistress Lanison, I have stopped my last coach," he said. "It was a good ending since it saved you from a scoundrel. Do not think too harshly of the past. It has had more honesty in it than you would imagine. For love of a woman I took to the road; for love of a woman the road shall know me no more. Ah, landlord, the ale! To you, mistress, and to you, Mr. Crosby. May God's blessing be with you to the end."

He drank, and tossing the empty tankard to the landlord, turned his horse and galloped back along the road.

For half an hour or more the coach stood before the door of "The Jolly Farmers," and then, with fresh horses, started briskly on its journey to Southampton. At the inn the landlord had waited upon his guests so attentively that they could say little to each other, but in the coach they were alone, shut away with their happiness from all the prying world. With her golden head upon his shoulder, Barbara told Crosby all that she had feared, all her doubts. There were so many things to make her certain that he was "Galloping Hermit."

"I know," he answered. "It has suited my purpose sometimes while I have been helping men to escape out of the West Country to let my enemies suppose that I was; but it never occurred to me that you would think so. Now I understand some of your words which troubled me, hurt me, almost. Are you content to take the way with me, dearest? I have not forgotten my promise."

"Gilbert, I am ashamed now that I ever asked you to make it," she said, clinging close to him. "Kiss me, and forgive me. I think I should have gone with you even if you had been 'Galloping Hermit.'"

Awaiting them, and beginning to grow anxious, they found Sydney Fellowes at "The Spanish Galleon." Crosby was not surprised, although he had half expected to see Martin Fairley.

As Fellowes bent over her hand, Barbara thanked him.

"Gilbert has told me how much you have done for me," she said. "I have

heard of the triple alliance Surely no woman ever had better friends than I."

"I wish Martin were here," said Crosby.

"We must talk of him presently," said Fellowes. "An hour for rest and food, then you must be on the road again. I must come with you as far as Southampton. It is my part to bid you farewell out of this country. I hope before long it may be my part to welcome you back."

When they had started again, Fellowes took some papers from his pocket.

"These are for you, Mistress Lanison, to read at your leisure. I had them from Martin Fairley to give to you."

"I wish I could have seen Martin to thank him too."

"That is impossible."

"Impossible! Why? Surely he is not dead?"

"No; yet I do not think you will ever see him again. Have you never guessed his secret, Mistress Lanison?"

"Secret?"

"Nor you, Crosby?"

"Surely Martin cannot be 'Galloping Hermit!'" Barbara exclaimed.

"He is. You will find the whole history in those papers," said Fellowes. "I knew soon after that night at Aylingford, the night Rosmore and I fought in the hall. It is a strange history. He came to Aylingford shortly after you were brought there as a child, a chance derelict it seemed, and not a little mad at times. But his coming was no chance. He knew your father, and came to be near you and watch over you. In a sense Martin was always a dreamer, but he was never a madman. He played a part to get a lodging within the Abbey, and he has played that part in your interest ever since. Many things which must have set you wondering at times you will understand when you read these papers. He soon discovered what manner of man your uncle was, and the kind of company the Abbey gave shelter to. It was worse than you have imagined--a whirlpool of vice and debauchery. Such vice is expensive, and a long run of bad luck at play might easily bring a man to the verge of ruin. Your uncle came to the brink of the precipice, his appetite for vice and play still insatiated. Your fortune was in his keeping, and he used it."

"Then I have nothing!" exclaimed Barbara, turning to Gilbert, "and I have been thinking and planning that--"

"My dear, your money was nothing to me."

"I know, but--"

"Better let me finish the story, Mistress Lanison," said Fellowes. "In some way, I cannot tell you how, Lord Rosmore discovered what your uncle was doing. He therefore obtained a hold over Sir John, which hold he used for the purpose of forcing himself upon you, meaning to marry you. I do not doubt that, in a way, he loved you, but he wanted your money

too, for Rosmore has squandered his possessions for years past, and must be near the end of his tether. Martin declares that it is only money he wants."

"Has he been using my fortune, too?"

"No, except those large sums which he has won from your uncle from time to time. Possibly, in the firm belief that your money would some day be his, he may have checked your uncle's recklessness, and he has never let Sir John know his position. Sir John was usually an unlucky player, in the long run he invariably lost, and there has hardly been a guest at the Abbey who has not enriched himself. This fact set Martin Fairley scheming. He became 'Galloping Hermit,' the notorious wearer of the brown mask, and plundered travellers with amazing success. It has been said of him that he never made a mistake, that the plunder he took was always large. His victims, too, were always those who had bad reputations; and, one thing more, Mistress Lanison, his victims have always won largely at Aylingford Abbey. Where Sir John squandered your fortune, Martin compelled Sir John's guests to disgorge on the high road. He knew when they were worth robbing. As 'Galloping Hermit' he got back a considerable part of your fortune--from the very persons who profited by Sir John's ill use of it. For my part, I cannot call that robbery. His plunder he stored at the Abbey, somewhere near the Nun's Room. You and Crosby escaped from Martin's tower one night that way. While you have been a prisoner in Dorchester, Martin has been to Aylingford, and, playing upon Sir John's superstition, showed him one way of breaking into the secret chamber where a treasure was hidden, and in exchange heard what Lord Rosmore intended to do with you. You were to be smuggled back to Aylingford. You will find all the history of his robberies very clearly stated in those papers, but of the history of the last few weeks, his rapid movements, his changes of character, his pretence of poor horsemanship, you will find no mention. Crosby will be able to tell you much of this. Having rescued you, Martin wanted completely to secure your safety, and believing that Rosmore's greed was far greater than his love for you, he conceived a plan which no doubt he carried out and which I hope was successful. He had carefully placed in a leather case papers containing his secret, together with the key of his tower, and full instructions of how his hiding-place was entered. This case he intended to drop where Rosmore could see it. He believed that Rosmore would hurry to Aylingford before he made any attempt to find you. We are close to Southampton, and safe so far, so Martin's idea of Rosmore may have been a correct one."

"And Martin's money?" asked Barbara.

"Your money," Fellowes corrected. "It was moved from the Abbey some little time ago, and is hidden at 'The Jolly Farmers.' Since you must be out of England for a while, Martin thought you might like to give me instructions concerning it."

"Mad Martin," murmured Barbara.

"Mad. Yes, in one way, perhaps," said Fellowes. "That way you will not learn from those papers. He was a man, and near him you grew to be a woman. Poor Martin! He was mad enough to love you."

Barbara put her hand into Crosby's. She remembered what the highwayman had said that morning, she remembered how she had once stood in the dark passage under Aylingford, one hand in Gilbert's, one in Martin's; two

men who loved her and had braved so much for her. And then she looked at Fellowes, whose face was turned from her. He had said nothing of what he had done, but she remembered that night in the hall.

"Three men; Gilbert and Martin, yes, and you, Mr. Fellowes," she said softly, putting her other hand into his. "It was a triple alliance, and, indeed, never was woman better served."

That night Gilbert Crosby and Barbara Lanison left England, and a few weeks later were married in Holland, in which country they found their first home together. When, a little later, England rose in revolt against King James, some of the negotiations with the Prince of Orange were conducted by Crosby, and he accompanied the Prince when he landed at Torbay, receiving later a baronetcy for his services. He became of some importance at the Court of William and Mary, but his happiest hours were those spent at his manor at Lenfield. There his dreams had fulfilment. Barbara flitted from room to room, as, in his visions, she had so often seemed to do; many a time he watched her slowly descending the broad stairs and held out his arms to her.

Sometimes a shade of sorrow would rest upon her brow.

"I was thinking of Martin," she said, when her husband questioned her.

Martin had never come to Lenfield. Gilbert could find out nothing about him. There were still highwaymen on the road, but nowadays no one was ever stopped by "Galloping Hermit" in his brown mask.

"I wonder what became of him," said Barbara; but she never knew.

CHAPTER XXX

ALONG THE NORTH ROAD

On the North Road there is a small inn, rather dilapidated and not attractive to travellers. Its customers are yokels from the neighbouring village, but occasionally a gentleman may be found warming himself at the open hearth and drinking the best that the house contains. Such a gentleman invariably rides a good horse, and is the recipient of open-mouthed admiration from the yokels. No gentleman but a highwayman would be there, they believe.

Only one man remained in the bar to-night, a jovial fellow of the farmer type, a lover of horses by his talk, and he was wont to boast that he had made the fortune of more than one gentleman of the road by the animal he had sold him.

"Shut the door, landlord. I'll wait a bit, and have another tankard of ale. I'm expecting a visitor."

"Who may that be?"

"One you know well enough, but perhaps you haven't seen him for some time."

In a few minutes there was a sharp knock at the door, and, when the landlord opened it, there entered a man wearing a brown mask and carrying a shapeless parcel under his arm.

"Galloping Hermit!" exclaimed the landlord, and it was evident that he was pleased to see his visitor.

"So you got my message," said the highwayman to the farmer.

"Aye, but I doubt if I've got a horse to sell that you would care to ride. What's become o' that mare o' yourn?"

"She's in the stables--I've just put her there. I want you to take her."

"Buy her? Well, I'll look at her, but buying and selling are two different things."

"Do you suppose I'd sell her?" was the answer. "No; I want you to take her and keep her--keep her until she dies, and then bury her in the corner of some quiet field. You're honest, and will do it if you say you will; and here's gold to pay you well for your trouble. She's done her work, and the last few days have finished her. She had to help me save a woman in the West Country, and it's broken her."

"I'll do it," said the farmer. "And you'll be wanting another horse?"

"Not yet. When I do you shall hear from me. Will you take the mare to-night? If I looked at her again I do not think I could let her go."

"Aye, it's like that with horses, we know," said the sympathetic farmer. "I'll take her to-night."

The landlord went to the stables with him, and when he returned found the highwayman standing in deep thought before the fire.

"I'm tired, friend. Is there a hole I can sleep in until daylight?"

"Of course."

"I must start at daybreak."

"What! Without a horse?"

"Yes, and without this," he said, taking off his brown mask, showing the landlord his features for the first time. "To-night 'Galloping Hermit' ceases to exist."

He kicked the dying embers into a blaze, and dropped the mask into the fire.

"That's the end of it. Show me this sleeping hole of mine," he said, taking up his parcel from the floor. "What clothes I leave in it you may have. I shall not want them any more."

With the dawn a man came out of the inn. He looked at the sky, and up the road, and down it. Under his arm he carried a fiddle and a bow. There fell from his lips a little cadence of notes, soft, low, not a laugh, nor yet a sigh, yet with something of content in it.

"For the love of a woman," he murmured, and then he went along the road northwards, his figure slowly lessening in the distance until it vanished over the brow of the hill which the morning sunlight had just touched.

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